

RAYMOND MHLABA AND THE GENESIS OF THE CONGRESS ALLIANCE:  
A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

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## **ABSTRACT**

The dominant and current theory about the African National Congress in the 1940s is that the Youth League in particular, led by the young, aspirant middle-class intellectuals, radicalised the organisation: that it was a bourgeois revolution within the ANC that led to its rejuvenation.

This thesis presents an alternative viewpoint. The study reveals that in Port Elizabeth, there was a distinctively communist-trade unionist oriented group which revolutionised the ANC: It was this group which consolidated racial and class co-operation against the apartheid system in the mid-1940s and early 1950s.

This thesis postulates that in Port Elizabeth it was the working-class activists such as Raymond Mhlaba, with their militant working-class ideologies that gave the ANC a new lease of life and gave the organisation its broad mass appeal.

The thesis therefore examines Raymond Mhlaba as an actor in the founding of the Congress Alliance in Port Elizabeth. It looks at how Mhlaba succeeded in building a firm alliance between the trade union movement, the Communist Party and the ANC. It is through this alliance that we learn about the political transformation of the ANC 'from below', that is, from a working-class cadre of activists rather than the middle-class leadership. Mhlaba himself was involved in all three formations and thus played a key role in the alliance politics.

Chapter one examines the period before 1941 in order to provide background to the central focus of the study. It looks at the history of the Eastern Cape, Mhlaba's birth place Fort Beaufort, and his early life in the context of the subject of enquiry, the national struggle in its wider context, and the political economy of the period between 1910 to 1941. Through these perspectives the study is able to examine and show the changing forms that the struggle takes at different periods of time. It gives an understanding of the influence of those historical developments on the period and of the form that the struggle took during the period under study.

Chapter two looks at the period 1942 to 1946, the years of Mhlaba's early involvement in the labour and political movements. It examines how, when and why Mhlaba got involved in these movements. The study considers the relationship between the Council of Non European Trade Unions (CNETU) trade unionists, the communists and the ANC activists. (Mhlaba belonged to all three formations.) It looks at how the ANC leadership was changed from a middle into a working class and Mhlaba's role in this transformation. Also the study examines how mass action in this period reflected racial and class co-operation; and the emergence of a distinctively working class leadership.

Chapter three examines Mhlaba's leadership role in the ANC and the Communist Party. It looks at examples of mass action and a selection of important events that took place between 1947 to 1952, in order to demonstrate how the foundation of the broad Congress Alliance solidified. That unity was influenced by the changing polity, post war conditions, and new leadership which included Mhlaba, in Port Elizabeth.

Chapter four examines the clandestine conditions in which Mhlaba operated, from 1953 until his imprisonment at Rivonia in 1963. It looks at: the transition from open mass organisation to underground mobilisation; the implementation of the M-Plan; the activities of the Communist Party underground. At the same time it examines the sustenance of the mass organisation through the formation of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the use of strategies such as stayaways and consumer boycotts in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The chapter also looks at repression by the government, which led to Mhlaba's departure to China, and finally his arrest at Rivonia in 1963.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many other important events such as the school boycott, the women protests, the formation of the PE PAC, the internal conflicts within the PE ANC branches, the 1961 bus boycott and the Rivonia Trial took place in the mid 1950s and early 1960s. Mhlaba was involved in some of these events. However they will not be dealt with in any significant way because they go beyond the scope of this thesis. The focus of this political biography remains essentially on Mhlaba's contribution in the build up of the Congress Alliance in the 1940s and 1950s. This explains why the Rivonia Trial Record of Mhlaba is not used in the thesis.

## Acknowledgements

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Thanks to the special people in my life, who were often sacrificed, Emmanguluko, my daughter, and Bonakele Qabaka.

This thesis is dedicated to Raymond Mhlaba and the liberation struggle.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Life History As Evidence**

The present Tripartite Alliance between the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC) remains a matter of intense political debate both from within the alliance, and from critics outside. The efficacy of that alliance in the era of negotiations, compromise, a broadened patriotic front alliance, and possible post apartheid government of national unity, has been subjected to the most severe scrutiny. From outside criticism, the alliance has come under inspection from those threatened by what they perceive as the 'communist influence over the ANC'. However, the rootedness of this alliance in the history of resistance has made it difficult, even for those pragmatists in its leadership to bow to the political expediency and dictates of the present day polity.

It is in this alliance that the subject of this study, Raymond Mhlaba, now a national leader, had his foundation and schooling. From 1942, Mhlaba was involved in the Non-European Council of Trade Unions (CNETU), the African National Congress (ANC) and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Through Mhlaba's political biography - his involvement with the labour movement, the Communist Party and the ANC in Port Elizabeth- we get an insight into the real nature of this alliance. Thus the pertinence of this research.

The study seeks to show how that alliance stood to strengthen the unity between racial and class groups working for the establishment of a democratic society against the apartheid system. As a corollary, the research seeks, further, to test and prove the hypothesis that the alliance was rooted and born out of the struggles of the masses in various formations.



The existing literature on the history and politics of black resistance in Port Elizabeth focuses *inter alia* on the formation of a strong political tradition in the townships. It identifies labour and political movements as the prime agents of mass mobilisation there.<sup>1</sup> Whilst some recognition is accorded to the role played by labour and political movements in contributing to the growth of community consciousness, it is imperative also to pay attention to the role played by individual activists such as Mhlaba who were instrumental in effecting this consciousness in the working class communities of Port Elizabeth. A biographical method is therefore employed in this study in the belief that it is appropriate to provide access to the dimensions and interpretations of events in ways less accessible by other research methods.<sup>2</sup>

Biographies are among the most popular and universal forms of historical writing. They have been found to be a powerful means of articulating the voice of the oppressed. This trend is reflected by an upsurge in biographical writing as part of a wider movement to document the histories of the ordinary people, who have been hidden from history.

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- <sup>1</sup> Cherry, J., "The Making of an African Working Class in Port Elizabeth. ca 1925 - 1963", MA Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1992.  
 Cherry, J., "Blot on the Landscape and Centre of Resistance: A Social and Economic History of Korsten", Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1988.  
 Baines, G., "The Port Elizabeth Disturbances of October 1920", MA Thesis, Rhodes University, 1988.  
 Baines, G., "The New Brighton Advisory Board c 1923-1952: Its Legitimacy and Legacy", Paper Delivered to Fifth Triennial History Workshop, University of Witwatersrand, 1990.  
 Lodge, T., Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987.  
 Kirk, J.F., "The African Middle Class, Cape Liberalism and Resistance to Residential Segregation at Port Elizabeth, South Africa, 1880 -1910", PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987.  
 Finnemore, M., "The Mobilisation of Black Workers in the Auto Industry in the Eastern Cape, 1970-1983", unpublished MA Thesis, University of Port Elizabeth, 1984.  
 Finnemore, M., "The Impact of Economic, Political and Industrial Relations Developments on Labour Turnover in the Port Elizabeth/Uitenhage Area from 1973 to 1988", in Industrial Relations Journal of South Africa, vol, 10, nos 1 & 2, 1990.  
 Taylor, B., "Controlling the Burgeoning Masses: Removals and Residential Development in Port Elizabeth's Black Areas, 1800s -1990", ISER Working Paper no 51, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 1991.  
 Riordan, R., "Township Political Loyalties", in Monitor, Port Elizabeth, June 1988.
- <sup>2</sup> Laslett, B., "Biography as historical Sociology: The Case of William Fielding Ogburn", in Theory and Society, vol.20 No. 4, August 1991, p.79.

The present political climate in the country also presents exciting opportunities for biographical or life history research and experiment. The post 1990 epoch, particularly, makes biography one of the most prominent methods of probing history. Significantly, Mhlaba's political biography is amongst the very first endeavours to respond to this historiographical challenge in South Africa.

Biography though, has not had unanimous scholarly respect as a person-centred approach and a specific narrative genre. It has been attacked for having underpinnings of models of analysis that honour the individual, the self-made man and woman over the collective, the community.<sup>3</sup> This research however is premised on the understanding that individual action occurs within and is shaped by broader historical currents and forms of social organisation.

Biography enables us to see within a concrete historical instance how individuals use the cultural, material and political resources available to them to shape their own lives. In turn these resources shape their actions. This observation seems to concur with Thompson's assertion that life history appears to offer information which is from its very nature, coherent and rooted in real social experience.<sup>4</sup>

This political biography intends not simply to tell a story about Mhlaba, but also to employ the biographical material to show the wider social and historical processes which shaped his political involvement during the time period that the study focuses on. His experiences in the liberation struggles coincide with the historical processes and give a graphic demonstration of the rendezvous of his personality with the history of socio-political developments in Port Elizabeth.

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<sup>3</sup> Vammen, T., "Forum: Modern English Auto/Biography and Gender", in Gender and History ISSN 0953-5333, vol,2, no.1, p.17.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson,P. "Life histories and the Analysis of Change", in Biography and Society, 1981, p. 141.

Philip Abrams argues that identities imply not merely personal histories but also social histories, for individuals hold membership in groups that are themselves products of the past. The individual and the society are viewed as aspects or phases of a unified human reality which are not essentially distinct entities.<sup>5</sup> Mhlaba's personal history not only reveals his particular role and contributions but also gives insight into the struggles waged by the working class communities in Port Elizabeth townships.

The study concentrates specifically on Mhlaba's political activities, after completing school in 1941, and before his imprisonment in 1963. It is a micro study focusing on the developments in Port Elizabeth where Mhlaba has lived his adult and political life.

These decades saw sharpened socio-political and ideological polarisation in the country. Communities were socially engineered into obstructively separate and racially determined entities. Similar tensions were reflected in the polity. Such a polarising political climate consequently led to the emergence of an anti-apartheid populist ideology which united all those opposed to the Nationalist Party's apartheid system, thereby giving birth to politics of non-racialism.

The period of the 1940s and 1950s is significant in Mhlaba's political life because it marked his move to Port Elizabeth and his assumption of membership and leadership positions in labour and political movements. His activism during this time coincided with an upsurge in African militant politics. The radicalisation of the ANC and the growing unity within black organisations intensified.<sup>6</sup> The political activities in which he was involved, as an ordinary member, then as an office bearer, and illegal and proscribed operative of the alliance organisations in the years between 1942 and 1963, provide us with a unique opportunity to unravel the dynamics at all levels of these organisations that form the pillars of this alliance in Port Elizabeth.

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<sup>5</sup> Abrams, P., Historical Sociology, Open Books, England, 1982, pp.227, 230.

<sup>6</sup> Everatt, D., "Alliance Politics of a Special Type: the Roots of the ANC/SACP Alliance, 1950-1954", in Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.18, no.1, March 1991, p.20.

Although numerous academics have explored the history of black resistance in the Eastern Cape - Port Elizabeth area, none of their research pays particular attention to **the role of the working-class element in the transformation of the ANC in the 1940s and early 1950s**. Donovan Williams who describes the Eastern Cape as the "traditional area of resistance" attributes the militant years of the ANC during this period to a "unique blend of Xhosa, tribal life, missionary educational institutions such as Lovedale and Fort Hare and a high concentration of industrialised Africans in New Brighton. He records that 50% of the ANC leaders in the 1950s were educated".<sup>7</sup> His study focuses more on the Eastern Cape as the cradle of African nationalism.

Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter write that it was the professional men with a comparably middle-class status that articulated their desire to remould their historic national organisation (ANC) in the 1940s. In the Eastern Cape, it was people such as Joseph Matthews, Duma Nokwe, Robert Matji, Robert Sobukwe, M.B. Yengwa and James Njongwe who were lawyers, teachers, bookkeepers or doctors, that articulated their dissatisfaction with the ANC leadership. These were the people who played a prominent role in the founding of the Youth League and the transformation of the ANC in the 1940s.<sup>8</sup> Here, the two authors focus attention on the middle-class elite who, they assume founded the Youth League that reorganised the ANC.

Tom Lodge does acknowledge the influence and power of networking between trade unionists, communists and ANC activists in effecting organised popular resistance in Port Elizabeth during the 1940s and 1950s. Nonetheless he upholds that it was in fact Youth Leaguers such as Dr Njongwe and Robert Matji that "much of the credit is due for the

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<sup>7</sup> William, D., "African Nationalism in South Africa: Origins and Problems", in Journal of African History, vol.XI, no.3, 1970.

<sup>8</sup> Karis, T., & Carter, G., From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary of African Politics in South Africa 1882-1964, vol.2 Hope and Challenge 1935-1952, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1973, pp. 98-107.

establishment of a local mass organisation" in Port Elizabeth.<sup>9</sup> His assertion clearly shows that he subscribes to the school of thought that purports a bourgeois revolution within the ANC in the 1940s.

The uniqueness of this biographical study therefore rests on the peculiarity that in Port Elizabeth, it was ordinary working-class people such as Mhlaba, who took the initiative and did the preparatory work in mobilising and organising the masses during the mid-forties right through to the period of the Defiance Campaign and thereafter. It was the working-class cadres even before Njongwe and Matji's appearance in Port Elizabeth (and later together with them) that fought for the end of socio-economic poverty and African political subordination to the white government. This study therefore provides an original contribution to the scholarship of black resistance.

## Methodology

Oral testimony was used in gathering data on Mhlaba's early life up to 1941. It gives first hand information about the events between 1942-1963 in which Mhlaba participated. The role of Mhlaba's oral evidence is particularly important because it broadens the sources of historical information. Oral testimony includes his voice and his perspective as a participant in the events of those years. It also helps to construct a more comprehensive picture of the past in order to correct the bias of official South African history, and thereby enrich academic research.<sup>10</sup>

The interviews conducted relate not only to Mhlaba, but also to other people who were active with him during that time. Many of the interviewees, like Mhlaba, are still staunch political activists today. They were eager to give information about his and their participation in the struggle as members of their respective organisations and as workers in the factories located in Port Elizabeth.

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<sup>9</sup> Lodge, T., **Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945**, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983, pp 51-52.

<sup>10</sup> Sideris, T., "Recording Living Memories in South Africa" in **Critical Arts**, vol.4, no. 2. 1986, p 216. Vansina, J., **Oral Tradition as History**, James Curry, London, 1985, preface and chapter 1.

Some of the interviewees were activists from other places who were deeply involved in the struggles of Port Elizabeth. Walter Sisulu is one example. He was the General Secretary of the ANC at the time and frequently visited Port Elizabeth, as it was one of the ANC strongholds.

Other interviewees who were with Mhlaba now reside in other parts of the country because of banishment by the state in the 1950s and 1960s. Frances Baard is in Mabopane, a township in the so-called independent state of Bophuthatswana. Nompoti Njongwe is in Matatiele; she and her husband, Dr Njongwe, now deceased left Port Elizabeth as a result of their political activities after the 1952 Defiance Campaign and the riots.

A few of the interviewees still support the cause of the struggle, although they are not active members of any political organisation anymore. One, however feels bitter about the struggles he was involved in together with Mhlaba in the 1950s, to the extent that he refused to be recorded. This disclosure is from informal conversations with the person.

Sometimes it was difficult or almost impossible to verify some of the information gathered from oral testimony because some people were deceased, others had gone into exile, others were jealous that it was Mhlaba who was being researched and not themselves, and yet others would not avail themselves.<sup>11</sup>

There has been little if any fundamental political and economic changes regarding what Mhlaba and others have fought for, for the past fifty-sixty years. This accounts for him being a loyal activist even today, despite the fact that he spent almost thirty years in Robben Island because of his political activism. He staunchly supports the current

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<sup>11</sup> The interviews with Mhlaba were conducted only during holidays, as the researcher was based in Cape Town. Also, not everybody who was active with Mhlaba could be interviewed because of the time factor. The interviews conducted can be said to be representative of those people involved in the class struggles of Port Elizabeth. However there are some people such as Robert Matji and Alvern Bennie who were not interviewed, whose input would have been crucial to the study. Numerous attempts were made to contact them but to no avail. Their input is considered critical to verify or dispute some of Mhlaba's claims because they are the only ones still alive, who were with Mhlaba in the late forties in Port Elizabeth.

Tripartite Alliance which professes to be fighting against national oppression and the economic exploitation of the majority of the people in this country. Mhlaba himself had fought for that prior to his imprisonment in 1963. In such circumstances, new interpretations and new values are inadvertently and sometimes deliberately imposed on the old. This cannot be under-estimated as a flaw in oral testimony. Moreso, it is a fact that human memory itself is imperfect. These factors are some of the areas where potential bias can present itself. Paul Thompson's argument that all evidence, whether oral, documentary or written requires rigorous examination for reliability thus becomes critical for the researcher.<sup>12</sup>

Although documentary evidence is equally significant in this exercise, the newspapers could not provide an adequate picture of the conditions and circumstances in which Mhlaba's activities were conducted. However, they were useful in verifying and cross checking Mhlaba and other interviewees' oral testimony and vice versa. The commercial press ( for example the Eastern Province Herald and the Evening Post), although useful to some extent, was pre-occupied by the news of the Second World War and its aftermath. There were relatively few reports about local news, especially on events in African areas. The Guardian which was produced by the South African Communist Party provided alternative reporting which gave prominence to local political struggles.

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson, E.P., The Voice of the Past: Oral History, Oxford University Press, 1978, chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **FORMATIVE INFLUENCE IN THE EASTERN CAPE, THE FORTRESS AND HEARTLAND OF RESISTANCE**

It was in Maqoma's land, in one of the villages known as Mazoka, that Raymond Mphakamisi Mhlaba was born, on February 14, 1920. He is the son of Dinah Mnyazi and Mxokozeli Ginger Mhlaba. The origins of his family as subjects of Maqoma reveals a social background steeped in the struggle against colonial domination and oppression. Nomathokazi and Zodwa were his only sisters to survive, out of eight siblings. Three brothers and two sisters died in infancy and Raymond was the only surviving son in the family. The family members grew up in Mazoka, where their ancestors were buried.<sup>1</sup>

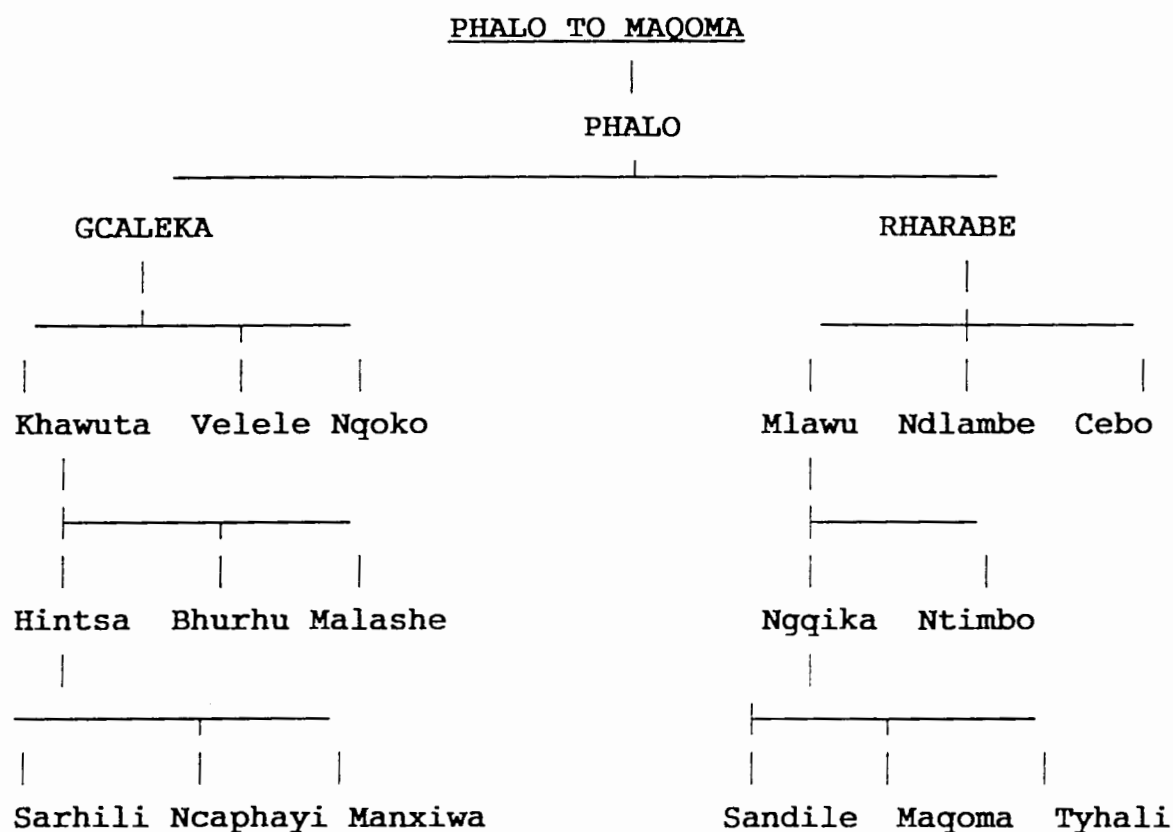
#### **The House of Phalo**

Maqoma was a Xhosa chief, a patrilineal descendant of Ngqika. Both were descendants of Tshiwo, who had a son named Phalo. Phalo in turn had two sons, Gcaleka and Rharabe, to whom the famous Xhosa traditional division of the Great House and the Right Hand House is attributed.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.  
Interview, Nomathokazi and Zodwa, 13/5/1992.



**Figure 1.**

Maqoma was from the Right Hand House and was the great grandchild of Rharabe. Rharabe's heir, Mlawu, gave life to Ngqika and Ntimbo. Ngqika, Mlawu's heir bore Maqoma, Sandile, Tyhali and others. All these Xhosa chiefs including the ones from the Great House possessed territories of their own, in what was considered to be Xhosaland. The pattern was that sons of the reigning chiefs left their father's lands and founded new chiefdoms of their own.

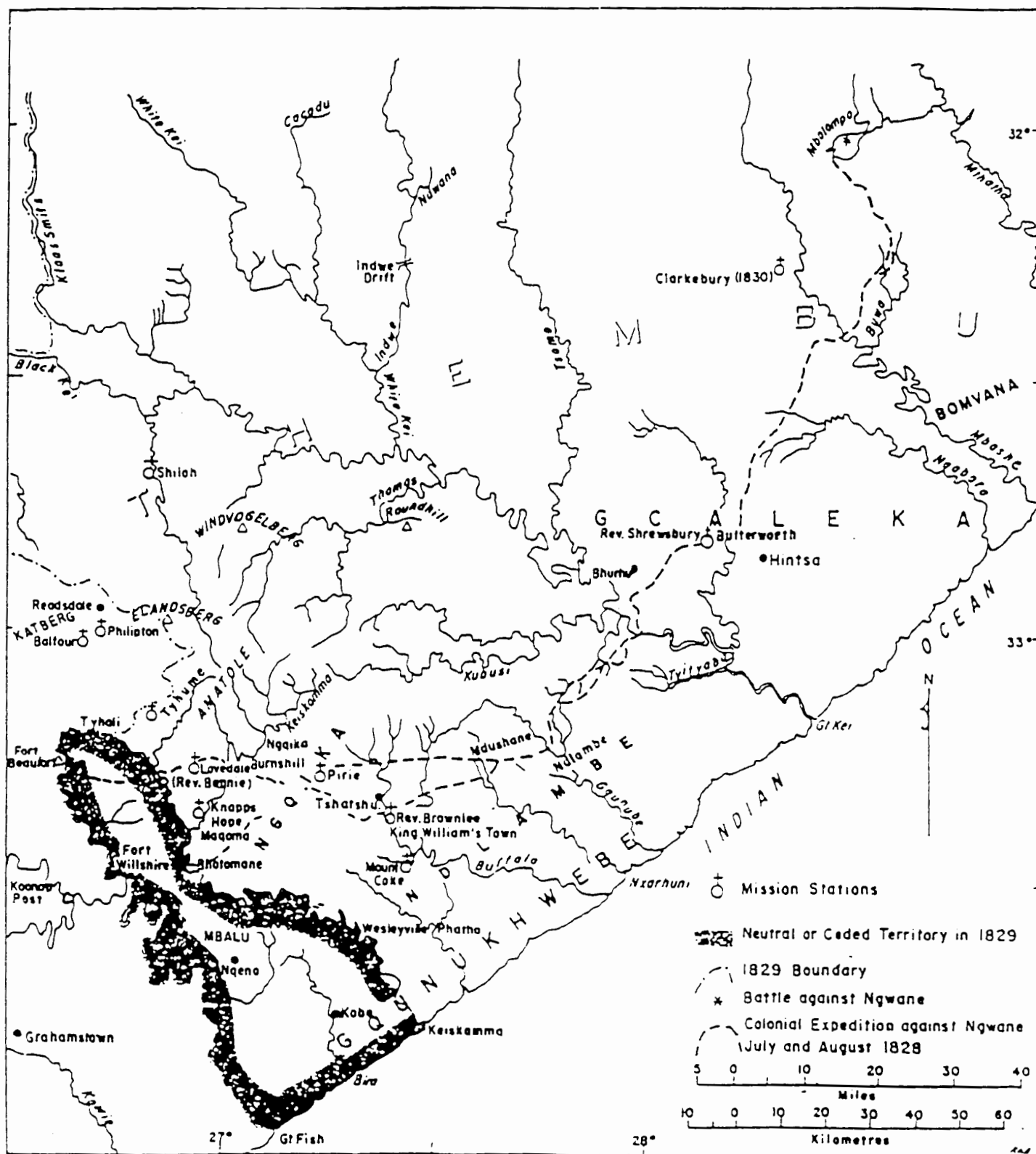
By the mid-1820s, Maqoma had already begun to eclipse the influence of his father, and had settled with his people between the headwaters of the Tyhume and Koonap rivers.<sup>2</sup> This is the land where Mazoka, Wezo, Gqugezi, Rantsana, Dubu villages, Tinis township, Mpofu (Seymour) and Ngxwenxa (The Kat) river are situated. Others describe Maqoma's land as the area between what later came to be known as Fort Beaufort and Katberg.<sup>3</sup> Some historians refer to this area as part of Western Xhosaland.<sup>4</sup> Mhlaba's village was named after Mazoka, who was one of Maqoma's councillors. The same village is also known as Nondyola.

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<sup>2</sup> Crais, C., The Making of Colonial Order, University of Witwatersrand Press, Johannesburg, 1992, p.113.

<sup>3</sup> Interview, Nkosinkulu Mjamba, 20/12/1991.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 16/5/1992.  
Interview, Norman Ngcongolo, 26/12/1991.

<sup>4</sup> Crais, The Making of the Colonial Order, p. 62.



## Wars of Dispossession

With the encounter between the settlers and the indigenous Xhosa population in the nineteenth century, this area previously known as Xhosaland experienced wars of dispossession. British soldiers appeared in 1812, 1819, 1829, 1834, 1845, 1850, 1878. They destroyed homesteads, captured cattle, shot people, humiliated, detained and killed chiefs, and conquered Xhosaland, whilst at the same time they expanded the British empire. This repressive invasion was accompanied by an ideological contestation. Missionaries also arrived with the word of a new God. The language and concept of private property began to creep in. This early process of commercialisation of the land and proletarianisation resulted in greater numbers of the Xhosa migrating to work on the white farms that sprang up on the land that was once theirs.<sup>5</sup>

The stories of land dispossession was related to Mhlaba in stories by his grandfather. Mhlaba recalls the emotion which accompanied the telling of these stories. His grandfather told him about settlers who were "devils" and how Africans who used to move freely, were suddenly restricted because their land was taken by the settlers.<sup>6</sup> Mhlaba's grandfather was referring to the land and political power lost during the wars of dispossession between the Xhosa and the colonialists, in what is today known as the Eastern Cape, a 'fortress' of black resistance.

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<sup>5</sup> Crais, The Making of the Colonial Order, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> Mhlaba does not know the exact date of his father's birth as there were no birth certificates in those days. It can be possibly assumed that his grandfather was born in the 1850s-1860s, his own father in the 1880s-1890s, given that Mhlaba himself was born in 1920 as the fifth child in his family.

Maqoma, who was still reigning during the days of Mhlaba's grandfather, was amongst those who experienced these conflicts in his life time. The colonial state expelled him from his land which they annexed. The land was initially given to the Khoi and eventually placed under British control.<sup>7</sup> Maqoma's expulsion was just a part in a whole process of dispossession. Driven by want and the need for subsistence, his people scattered around in search of work. This experience was not unique to Maqoma or other Xhosa chiefdoms, but similar to Africans in other parts of the country.<sup>8</sup>

### Legacy of Resistance

Colonial expansion, aggression and domination however, was generally met with fierce resistance. Maqoma in particular, was known to be incomparably the most brilliant and daring of the Xhosa generals.<sup>9</sup> He was brave, intelligent, strong minded and decisive. Although he was expelled from his land in 1829 and was chased out of his refuge near Fort Beaufort in 1853, he led the Xhosa forces who fought and brought Harry Smith, the notorious British governor almost to a standstill in 1853.<sup>10</sup> He was regarded as the hero of the Waterkloof, a mighty natural stronghold which provided a superb fortress for the Xhosa forces against the invading British soldiers. He and Hans Brander, who led a band of Khoi rebels, burned farmhouses and raided cattle deep into the colony.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> After forming his chiefdom in the mid-twenties, Maqoma settled near the upper reaches of the Kat river, part of the 'no-man's land' (also referred to as the 'ceded or neutral territory'), between the Baviaans and the Western Xhosaland, in what later became the district of Fort Beaufort. The 'no-man's land' was a fertile land of about 4000 square miles between the Kat and Keiskamma which was appropriated from Ngqika in 1819 by Somerset, the British governor who made it a buffer zone between the Xhosa and the colonists after the 1819 war of dispossession. Ten years later, the colonial state expelled Maqoma from his own land, which included part of his father's birthplace. See Crais, The Making of The Colonial Order, 1992,p.62; Peires, J., The House of Phalo, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981,p.79, Mnguni,Three Hundred Years, p.78.

<sup>8</sup> Crais, The Making of the Colonial Order, pp.114,116, where he elaborates on the impact of the Xhosa's loss of land in the 'neutral' territory.

<sup>9</sup> Peires, J., The Dead Will Arise, Ravan Press, Braamfontein, 1989, p.67.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.15. Smith was the one who forced Sandile to kiss his feet. He also put his foot on Maqoma's neck.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 15,67. Peires gives a more comprehensive description of Maqoma's character and Waterkloof, than the selected one in the text.

However, Maqoma was captured and imprisoned twice and died on Robben Island in 1873. Significantly, Robben Island was the place where Raymond Mhlaba was to be condemned for twenty seven years, for his own role in the continued struggle against oppression and racial domination. Maqoma's sons were among the first of the next generation to take their places on Robben Island.<sup>12</sup>

### **Family Profile and the Political Economy**

Mhlaba's father was amongst those thousands of youths who were channelled into cheap labour reservoirs for the growing mines of Kimberley and Johannesburg. The growth of the mining industry in the late 19th century had generated an insatiable demand for cheap labour. He was driven out of his village desperately in need of money to pay lobola, tax, rent and for other household needs. As a mine-worker in Kimberley, he moved from being a peasant to being a wage- labourer. He was to work as a labourer and later as a policeman in Cape Town, Fort Beaufort, Seymour, Readsdale, Alice and Port Elizabeth. He was forced to leave his family behind.<sup>13</sup>

What has been recounted above is typical of the process of proletarianisation. Like others he could not support his family through subsistence agriculture on the tiny piece of land he occupied in Mazoka. The old subsistence family system was replaced by the cash nexus and his life was inextricably bound into the dominant capitalist economy.

The Mhlaba family occupied a rural dwelling with two rondavels and a kraal. They used to have cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and poultry, but as time went on, they were forced by circumstances to sell these animals, the number of which had already diminished due to deaths caused by droughts. They were left with a few pigs.

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<sup>12</sup> Peires, The House of Phalo, pp. 89-90.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.

Compared with other residents in the village, the Mhlaba's could not be said to be rich or poor, but rather average in terms of material wealth, within what could be described as African standards. Mhlaba thinks that his family was comparatively better off than other families that were very poor and without land at all. Yet these poor families somehow survived. He attributes this to pre-colonial communal networks in African societies which were characterised by generosity, tolerance, hospitality and the ability to share with those in need. People in Mazoka were no different.

Mhlaba's mother, 'iZizikazi lase Dikeni', (her praise name) used her own labour and that of the children on the piece of land they occupied. She and her children had to till the land and look after the stock to satisfy their basic consumption needs for food. She had never worked as a domestic worker for white people, as was common with other women. Mhlaba describes his mother as someone who came from a well-to-do family. She had pride, was stubborn, yet intelligent, independent and assertive although she received very little formal western education.

Her husband was hardly at home except during holidays. As a policeman he was being constantly transferred to places such as Alice, Cradock, Balfour Cape, Readsdales and Seymour. He served the Fort Beaufort police force for twenty-four years, from 1916-1940. A good physique and an ability to articulate oneself in the mothertongue were special requirements for African police, as there were not many of them who could meet the educational qualification demanded.<sup>14</sup>

The work performed by African police was to look out for stock thieves, curb drunkenness, prevent possession and selling of liquor, house breaking, assault and hooliganism. Stock theft was the most common criminal offence as farming was still the dominant economic activity. Farm workers employed by white farmers had a tendency of paying themselves by slaughtering a goat or a sheep in compensation for low wages, during the sleepless nights spent in far away grazing spots.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> UG Report of the Commissioner of South African Police, 1916, p.30.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.

The low wages earned by Mhlaba's father could not meet the family's most basic household requirements. He made arrangements with the general dealer in Nondyola village for his wife to obtain these goods on credit, the account would be settled at the end of the month, the only time he came home.<sup>16</sup> Industrialisation in South Africa thus forced the Mhlaba family into the ranks of the African proletariat.

Mhlaba's early life coincided with the deliberate and determined perpetuation of European domination and the exclusiveness of an all white state. He was to see the exploitation of African labour by powerful and well organised white capitalist class in the mining and manufacturing industries.

This exploitation was given new impetus by the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which brought about co-operation between the British imperialists and Afrikaner nationalists and the maintenance of white supremacy. Africans, 'coloureds' and Indians were excluded from real power and were denied the vote in Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State provinces.<sup>17</sup>

The path of capitalist development simultaneously generated further misery and suffering among rural and urban Africans. A pattern of accelerating rural impoverishment was evident in the early twentieth century. African rural economies were under increasing strain. Many wage labourers as exemplified by Mhlaba's father, left their rural homes and headed for the growing mining industry which had generated an insatiable demand for cheap labour. The 1913 Land Act forced Africans off their land into the mines, onto white farms, and to the towns. An increasing number of Africans moved into urban centres and became fully proletarianised.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.

<sup>17</sup> Simons, H.J. & R.E., Class and Colour in South Africa IDAF, London, 1969, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Maylam, P., A History of the African People of South Africa, David Philip, Cape Town, 1987, pp. 143-144, 148.



A series of legislative measures by the Union government followed, endorsing and extending the pillars of segregation between the white ruling class and the black proletariat. This meant further landlessness, homelessness, powerlessness, helplessness, wandering, impoverishment and appalling poverty for Africans.

The formation of the South African Native National Congress in 1912, which later became the African National Congress, was a direct response to this budding exclusive white South Africa. The congress was formed to fight against the exclusion of Africans from the franchise, inequitable land distribution and growing racial discrimination in the job market.<sup>19</sup> It remained committed to opposing the principle of segregation throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Reaction to segregation and political oppression went hand in hand with resistance to economic exploitation. Some Africans resisted recruitment to the mines. Others deserted when working conditions became unsatisfactory. Sometimes individuals, who were not organised, resisted exploitation in the workplace.<sup>20</sup> These acts of resistance were a prelude to the formation of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) in 1919.

The ICU organised black workers in the cities and rural areas. Its membership soared and it soon became a mass protest movement for national liberation. It was in the forefront of black opposition in the 1920s. Although the life span of the ICU was ephemeral, as a political organisation, it had an 'astounding impact on consciousness and resistance in the country and articulated popular grievances and fuelled protest to an unprecedented degree'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.155.

<sup>20</sup> Webster, E., Essays in Southern African Labour History, Ravan Press, 1978, pp. 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> Bradford, H., A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa 1924-1930, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987, chapters 1 & 8.  
 O'Meara, D., "Class and Nationalism in African Resistance: Secondary Industrialisation and the Development of a Mass Movement in South Africa, 1930-1950", MA Thesis, Sussex University, 1973, chapter 2.  
 Maylam, A History of the African People, pp. 159-160.

Following the formation of the ICU, was that of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1921. Like the ICU, the CPSA played a central role in the political development of the black working class during the 1920s. The Communist Party initially, took up the cause of white workers, but later strove to enlarge its black following. It organised black workers and produced a newspaper, The South African Worker, in which more than half of its articles were written in African languages.<sup>22</sup>

In 1924, the Industrial Conciliation Act was introduced. This Act provided for a system of collective bargaining between the employers and the employees. The employees could form trade unions which would be approved, recognised and registered by employers' association. Yet the Act discriminated against African men as 'pass bearers' and the indentured indians. African men were excluded from the official definition of 'employees' and as such were barred from registered unions. Black unskilled workers were not protected under this Act. The Act reinforced the colour bar and prohibited the organisation of African workers.

Yet, in spite of further repressive industrial legislation, more African industrial unions continued to emerge. The year 1927 for example saw the birth of the Native Bakers, the Clothing, Mattress and Furniture unions. A year later, the South African Federation of Non-European Trade Unions was established as an umbrella organisation, and the number of unions continued to increase.<sup>23</sup> A League of African Rights was also launched in 1929. The League called upon all those who were interested in the struggle of black men and women for freedom in Africa.<sup>24</sup> All of these formations constituted, were attempts to fight against white oppression and exploitation.

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<sup>22</sup> Magubane, M.B., The Political Economy of Race and Class, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1979, p.282;  
Lodge, Black Politics Since 1945, pp.7-8;  
Maylam, A History of the African People, p.157.

<sup>23</sup> Lacom, Freedom From Below, Skotaville Publishers, Johannesburg, 1986, pp 72-73.

<sup>24</sup> Roux, E., Time Longer Than Rope, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1964, pp. 226-227.

As time went on, however, the efficacy of these organisations become doubtful. This was because the various movements were not co-ordinated. Maylam argues that black opposition movements in the first three decades of the twentieth century, did not pose any serious challenge to the state. They espoused different strategies and acted with differing degrees of militancy. He asserts that the ANC and the ICU adopted cautious and moderate methods with sporadic militant acts of protest. The ANC branches and provincial organisation steadily deteriorated. The Depression of the 1930s aggravated the ANC's already precarious financial standing. Divisions between the moderates and the radicals also undermined the congress unity. By the early 1930s the ANC and the CPSA were becoming ineffective. The ANC in particular nearly become moribund.<sup>25</sup>

The early forties however witnessed the emergence of a more radical African political activism. The lull of the thirties came to an end. The outbreak of the Second World War opened up employment opportunities for African workers and this led to the revival of African trade unions. The Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) was established in 1941. It served as a co-ordinating body to which most African unions affiliated.<sup>26</sup> The development of African union organisation stimulated militancy and activism among African workers,<sup>27</sup> and this was precisely the national scenario in which Mhlaba was to operate, during his political career in Port Elizabeth.

### **The birth of an activist**

Mhlaba's early childhood was spent in Mazoka with his mother, sisters, relatives, friends and village people. As a little boy, Mhlaba was a herdboys whilst his sisters collected wood and fetched water from the river, and his mother prepared their meals. These

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<sup>25</sup> Maylam, A History of the African People, p.182.

<sup>26</sup> Finnemore, M. & van der Merwe, R., Introduction to Industrial Relations in South Africa, Lexicon Publishers, Johannesburg, 1989, p. 18;  
Maylam, A History of the African People, p.182.

<sup>27</sup> Magubane, The Political Economy of Race and Class, p. 127;  
Maylam, A History of the African People, p. 182.

were clearly articulated gender roles. Mhlaba also learnt about working on the family fields. His father was employed as a wage labourer and was away from his family most of the time. On the few occasions his father was home, he would oversee Mhlaba's work. These were routine family chores which became second nature to every family member.

Mhlaba's family was a deeply religious. They went to the Methodist church and attended services every Sunday. They conducted prayers twice daily, in the morning and evening. This was common practice in the village. Apart from the blindfolded loyalty occasioned by religion and the acceptance of christianity, these beliefs also served to reinforce adaptation to the economic and political system of the white authorities by the Mhlabas and other rural proletarian families in the village.

Mhlaba's parents believed that the priests were people who could baptise their children. The priests were people who kept a holy book, who could read and understand it. 'This book gave knowledge about what they already knew and a 'deeper and better' knowledge about life'. His parents believed that the government had absolute powers through which they could provide or deny them their rights. Perhaps if they scrapped and sacrificed some of their traditional beliefs, their children could go to those people and learn that 'deeper knowledge' about life.<sup>28</sup> This highlights the role played by religion and missionaries in legitimising the new socio-political and economic system in the eyes of the indigenous people.

With such beliefs, Mhlaba's parents accordingly sent him, his sisters, Nomathokazi and Zodwa to missionary schools. The missionaries as educators played what was regarded as an indispensable role of preparing these African youths to take their place in the 'new civilisation'. The missionaries saw education as inextricably linked with the promotion of the christian gospel and consequently with the erosion of the African culture. Schools therefore were necessary to teach Africans to read the bible. The government on its side

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<sup>28</sup> Post, K., "Peasantization" and Rural Political Movements in West Africa', in European Journal of Sociology, XIII, 1972, pp. 237-238.

too, saw education as an instrument to pacify and co-opt Africans into colonial society.<sup>29</sup>

Mhlaba mentions that his village was one of the areas in which the British rule was successful in de-tribalising the Africans. The church certainly played a significant role in this respect. When people performed some of their indigenous customs and practices, the missionaries would refuse to accept them. They were declared "ungodly".<sup>30</sup> Thus under colonialism the Nondyola community was assimilated into a society characterised by relations of coercion and obedience. This new society subjected the people of Nondyola to the demands and the sanctions of the power holders who were outside of their traditional social stratum, namely the government, church and the traders.<sup>31</sup>

It was in such an atmosphere that at the age of nine, Mhlaba began his pre-primary education at a mission school in Nondyola. The school was managed by Canon Malgas, a black priest, whose job it was to assist in missionary work. Mhlaba does not remember much about Malgas' mission school, except singing scriptural memory verses and learning to write the vowels. However, his school attendance never interfered with his domestic duties which he still performed before and after school.

When Mhlaba was twelve, he became ill and he had to leave home and stay with his father at Balfour police station in the single men's quarters. The move to Balfour was considered necessary because the family had no hope for his recovery in Mazoka, given that five other Mhlaba children had already died.

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<sup>29</sup> Ashley, M., "African Education and Society in the Nineteenth Century Eastern Cape", in Beyond the Cape Frontier, Longman, London, 1974, p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.

<sup>31</sup> Post, "Peasantization", p. 226.

Mhlaba remembers that he had had a bad dream the previous night:

"It was like some people were calling me. I could not recognise who they were but I was told that one of them was Nonzwakazi's grandmother who was well known for witchcraft. She was showing me children, saying that they were my brothers and sisters and they were calling on me to join them. I said no to her and ran away, crying. This woman came chasing after me with the children and I had to hide among the trees and bushes. I could not recognise where I was and I was so terrified, crying in the dark. I was actually woken up by my younger sister, Zodwa because I was late to take the animals to the field. She found me wet with perspiration, I was shaking and I had lost my voice. She ran to the main house, herself crying and shocked, to call my mother. When my mother saw me she started screaming herself and the neighbours came in to find out what was happening. I think I must have passed out at some point because I do not recall what happened thereafter. I was told later that my mother went to Nonzwakazi's grandmother and gave her a bit of her mind. I vaguely remember feeling weak and being told that my father was coming to fetch me."<sup>32</sup>

Zodwa and Nomathokazi could also remembered this incident. They state that they thought they were going to loose their only brother that day. Zodwa who was the first to see him says that his brother 'looked like a zombie that day'. His face looked dark than how it normally does, he looked ugly and thin like an animal, sort of'. The two sisters accompanied their mother who later went to 'confront' Nonzwakazi's grandmother.<sup>33</sup>

Thereafter Mhlaba joined his father at Balfour. His father again got transferred to Seymour. There, Mhlaba proceeded to study standard three and four under the tuition of Mr Stanley Gqomfa. The Seymour school went up to only standard four. Mhlaba's father arranged with Mr Wesley Qali, who was a principal at Readsdales, for his son to

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Zodwa and Nomathokazi, 13/5/1992.  
The two sisters showed the researcher Mhlaba's room and where Nonzwakazi's family house is (the alleged witch). Photographs of Mhlaba's family house and his room were taken. It was felt however inappropriate to take those of Nonzwakazi's family house.

be admitted to study standard five at his school. Mhlaba continued to stay with his father in the men's quarters of the police station. After passing standard five at Readsdales, he went to Lovedale for standard six. This time Mhlaba did not have to stay in a police station because his aunt had a house in Ngwevu, a village nearby. He then spent the first six months with his aunt and thereafter moved to his father's friend Mr Macembe in Tyatyorha, another village near Lovedale.

His mother was not pleased with Mhlaba moving residence frequently, especially because he had left home on account of illness. It was a difficult and sad experience for her to part with him. He was her favourite son and there was a special bond between them. She was never happy to let him spend a single night with his grandparents in the same village even before he got ill. This attitude made her unappreciative of relatives and friends who accommodated her son. She particularly did not like the fact that her son was to be under someone else's influence. She wanted him to be raised the way she personally believed was proper to bring up a child. It was this disposition which made her over protective of him.

Mhlaba himself admits that he got along very well with his mother, more than with his sisters. He recalls the time when his father would draw him into family disputes, with the intention of getting him to persuade his mother who was reputed for her stubbornness in the family. Mhlaba had his own way with her. He would call her by her maiden name and ask her what was bothering her. She would often tell him and Mhlaba would intervene and try to resolve whatever conflict there was between herself and other members of the family. Thereafter she would be fine. Mhlaba claims that he related well with his younger sisters. They have always treated him as their "bhuti", (big brother) with all the respect that goes with that.

After obtaining his standard six certificate at Lovedale, he was sent to the initiation school and thereafter went on to study at Healdtown secondary school in Fort Beaufort. His sisters only went up to standard six, as it was conventional not to send girls for higher education in those days. It was perceived as a waste of time and money by the girls' fathers to educate their daughters who were going to get married and leave their

homes to stay with their husbands in any case.

Mhlaba also spent his youth indulging in typical rural activities such as stick fighting within and outside his village. There was a misconception that schooling, associated with western civilisation, made boys physically weak, and that they forgot how to fight properly as they spent most of their time at schools. In fact during school vacations Mhlaba and other school boys had to prove themselves by fighting with the village boys who were full of contempt and disrespect for them.

At other times, there were occasions like weddings in his village. An exuberant mood would overwhelm the whole community. About three announcements would be made on each Sunday prior to the date of the ceremony. Weddings were held on Tuesdays at eleven o'clock and that meant no school for the children because the church building was usually used for schooling purposes. People would send their donations in the form of sheep, goats, chicken and so on, in advance so that the families who were hosting the wedding would be able to prepare a feast for the whole community.

Mhlaba does not recall himself interacting with whites, indians and 'coloureds' in Fort Beaufort. His impression of whites was derived from listening to comments by elderly people in the village. They would say " hey, a white person is in heaven" or when they saw a beautiful house allegedly owned by a white person, they would remark that " that is a small heaven". His first encounter with an indian person was when he was twelve years old. This was when he went to stay with his father in Balfour, Seymour and Readsdales. There were indians in these districts who owned businesses. His conception of a 'coloured' person was based on some Xhosa prejudices and stereotypical attitudes. When a Xhosa speaking person was said to be iLawu (a 'coloured' person), it implied that, that person was being scolded or criticised for not having scrupulous manners.<sup>34</sup> This kind of stereotypical thinking was derived from the times of the wars of dispossession when some of the Khoi fought on the side of the British against the Xhosa.

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.



The school and the church were areas of keen involvement in Mhlaba's early life. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was in these institutions that he showed early signs of an anti-establishment mind and challenge to the status quo. Although his political career can be said to have begun in Port Elizabeth, the seeds of his political consciousness were sown much earlier, when he was still a boy. The unyielding and stubborn attitude exhibited itself in the teenage Mhlaba at home, church and at school.

Mhlaba questioned a picture which was sent as a present to his mother by his aunt who was working in Johannesburg. This picture was on market at the time. It had a face of a white man with a big eye and long beard. The man in the picture was supposed to be god who saw the whole world with this big eye. Beneath him, were white children flying as angels. Following them was a black man with a long tail and horns, holding a fork, and representing the devil. The offensive nature of this picture as Mhlaba saw it, can be seen in figure 3, which also carries similar visuals.

Mhlaba protested to his mother about it and insisted that it should be removed from their house. His mother was perturbed to the extent that this matter had to wait for his father to arrive home so that it could be discussed properly in the family. As a christian, his mother was very upset and disappointed. She was worried about the teaching her son was receiving. It appears that she was blaming the school for Mhlaba's perception of the picture. Mhlaba was then in standard seven (Form two, as it was called then) at Healdtown. His father, on the contrary, was on his side. This was because his father had heard similar criticisms of the picture from friends in his previous working experiences in Kimberley and Cape Town. This suggests that even before Mhlaba was born, this picture was viewed with controversy. The picture was finally removed.

One Sunday, Mhlaba boldly walked out of the usual church service because the presiding minister, a Reverend Petros, preached that the congregation should be humble like birds and not ask what they will be eating the next day. This message had a profound meaning to Mhlaba. He could not understand why people would not be concerned about where they would get their next meals or where they would be sleeping the next day. Mhlaba took exception to this message, he became angry and impulsively left in the middle of

the service. With such tendencies, the 'radical' young man ended up exempted from family prayers at home.

When he arrived in Healdtown for standard seven, then Form One, Mhlaba refused to take the Holy Scriptures as one of his subjects. For this he was taken to the principal, Mr George Geli. The latter explained to him that Healdtown was a missionary institution and for that reason it was compulsory to include the Holy Scriptures in the syllabus. Mhlaba comments that Mr Geli never forced him to learn the subject, but he made him understand the situation.

Mhlaba's comment was that:

" you should take note that the above incidents had absolutely nothing to do with my later conception of the ideology of communism. I had not come across any word like communism or capitalism for that matter, in my life, even in the dictionary or history we were taught at school. I just started to reason out certain things in my mind and I just could not accept others like these".<sup>35</sup>

It was Mr Sigila, a teacher from Mxhelo who directly acquainted Mhlaba with political concerns. Sigila organised students from villages of Healdtown, Fort Beaufort and Alice. He explained to them how the land of Africans was confiscated by white people and how it was important that it should be repossessed, for it rightfully belonged to Africans. Sigila was amongst those vociferous people who voiced the grievances of Africans. He approached the authorities to protest about the living conditions of Africans in the districts of Healdtown and Fort Beaufort.<sup>36</sup> He was active in the Cape African Voters Association.

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<sup>35</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 18/12/1990.

<sup>36</sup> BC: 630 Kingwilliamstown. Holloway Commission., pp 4531-4535.

Mhlaba and other students therefore formed the Mayibuye Student Association whose main objective was to repossess the land. The students met occasionally to discuss how they were to organise the youth in their own villages during school vacations. The young people in the villages were to be invited to functions such as picnics and "potsoyis" (parties). Members of the association were to use such opportunities to talk about the dispossession and repossession of African land. Mhlaba mentions that, on account of the lack of funds, proper organisation, co-operation between the parents and the youth, this objective was unfortunately never realised. Yet, he claims that the Mayibuye never dissolved and as students they continued to meet at Lovedale.<sup>37</sup>

Mhlaba also believes that with the exception of the Holy Scriptures, the other subjects he studied such as History, Biology, Geography, Agriculture and the languages, threw light on life in general. He enjoyed the content of the subjects more than merely passing them and he attributes this to teachers like Messrs Honono, Nowa, Nwana and Libenkele. He asserts that as students, they were fortunate to have these teachers. He singles out Mr Honono, his History teacher, who went beyond the prescribed syllabus in his teaching. Honono was a member of the Unity Movement and was also affiliated to the Cape Teachers' Association.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Mhlaba came from a christian family which was made to believe that loyalty to the faith took precedence over objective material conditions. However, christianity had different social implications for him. It was not simply a personal religion but also a guide for political, economic and cultural judgement. He found it morally wrong to see virtue and vice on racial lines, hence he could not accept the picture of the white god and the black

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 19/12/1990. Attempts were made also to tap the Healdtown School Records for more information about the Mayibuye Student Association, but nothing was found on it. Unfortunately some of the school documents were lost during the riots.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 19/12/1990.

devil. It was unacceptable to him to be humble like a bird and leave his future to the mercy of 'God', as a christian.

His superficial yet curious misgivings about the values of christianity and his concern about the return of the land to Africans, were an integral part of long historic struggles against white domination and exploitation. Mhlaba was unaware that his naive scepticism about the authorities as represented by the church, the school and the colonial state, was shared by thousands of people in the whole of the country and also in the whole world. Africans as the oppressed and exploited people were already fighting colonialism and capitalism, for liberation, justice and socialism by the 1920s and 1930s.

This was but the beginning of a long political struggle for Mhlaba. If his ancestors fought and lost the wars of dispossession under the gallant and brave leadership of Chief Maqoma, the struggle was not over. However its form was to change, in line with the wider changes in the political economy of a post - 1910 South Africa. The proliferation of political movements although they were weak, provided the continuity for the struggles for justice and democracy. Mhlaba and many others like him engaged in similar struggles following in the footsteps of their forefathers. He was part of a generation that was to give special character to the struggle in a period of heightened political struggle.

fig.3



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **POLITICAL INITIATION, 1942 -1946**

#### **From Fort Beaufort to Port Elizabeth**

The year 1942 marked the end of Raymond Mhlaba's schooling and the beginning of his working life. There was no money to pay his tuition and therefore as a Standard nine drop out, he had to seek employment. Financial pressures made him leave his mother and sisters in Fort Beaufort and go and join his father who was already working in Port Elizabeth, the most industrialised city in the Eastern Cape.

Although East London was nearer to their village than Port Elizabeth, the growth and developmental impact of the manufacturing industry in Port Elizabeth was greater than in East London. The latter was comparatively smaller in terms of the development output and employment than Port Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this explains why Mhlaba's father worked in Port Elizabeth instead of East London.

Migrancy had become a general experience to almost all rural families. Their lives were dominated by wage labour from the mining and manufacturing industry. Economic compulsion forced many individuals to go and earn money in town so as to provide the sole support for their families or at least supplement their living in the country.<sup>2</sup> Dependency on urban wages was almost universal for large numbers of workers who were forced to leave the countryside and travel long or short distances to various workplaces.

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, W.J., "Urbanisation and Influx Control in South Africa with particular reference to the Eastern Cape", Developmental Issues in the Eastern Cape, 1984, p.30.

<sup>2</sup> Mayer, Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservatism and the Process of Urbanisation in a South Africa, Oxford University Press, 1961, chapter 1 & 283.

The Social and Economic Planning Council Report of 1940 pointed out that there were few families who lived in the reserves who could be true agriculturalists or farmers depending solely on agriculture and or farming for a livelihood. This was because almost all males at some time or another had to go out to work.<sup>3</sup> The Mhlabas were no exception.

When he came to work in Port Elizabeth, Mhlaba stayed with his father who was, by now, working for Shell company as a watchman. His father had retired from the police force in 1940, after having worked for twenty-four years, from 1916-1940. The salary he had earned from his pension fund and the one he earned from Shell, were so meagre that he could hardly maintain his family. Hence he asked his son Mhlaba, to assist financially, by finding employment. Mhlaba's father was hoping that, with his son's financial help, together they would be able to meet the family's cash needs regularly, out of what they were to earn as migrants in Port Elizabeth. Mhlaba was therefore expected to remit money regularly to his parents.<sup>4</sup>

### **Labour and Political Movement in Port Elizabeth**

Port Elizabeth is situated on the shores of Algoa Bay. The area is drained by the Swartkops, Baakens, Coega and Sundays Rivers. Its initial development was confined to a narrow belt between the escarpment and the sea, with the southward extension inhibited by the Baakens River and the westward expansion slowed by the unavailability of fresh water.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> SRP- 1/2/176, Social and Economic Planning Council Report, no9, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Mayer, Townsmen or Tribesmen, chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Environmental Planning and Energy, Port Elizabeth Topography: Greater Algoa Bay, Guide Plan, 1979, pp. 1, 10.

The town was founded in the early nineteenth century during the period of the eastern frontier wars. When the first white settlers established themselves in 1820, the Xhosa and the Khoi were not allowed to settle near the town limits. As the town grew, retail and commercial functions forced development northwards. Gradually Port Elizabeth became an established town with shops and industries.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid-1850s, Port Elizabeth became not only the centre of mercantile activities but also the strongest financial centre in the Cape Colony. The Eastern province came to be the main arena of pastoral expansion and there was an inflow of foreign capital. The Standard Bank opened its first offices in South Africa, in 1863, in Port Elizabeth. The 1870s experienced growth and capital accumulation and Port Elizabeth's expansion reflected the boom in trade. This town became the centre of the wool industry, a market for the ostrich trade and the financial centre for the Cape colony.<sup>7</sup> With its harbour, Port Elizabeth developed into a centre of commercial capital centred around its port. It also served the agricultural interests of the people of the hinterland and was even known as the "Liverpool" of the Cape.<sup>8</sup>

From a centre of commercial capital, Port Elizabeth developed into a centre of secondary industry. The footwear industry was established during the First World War. This was followed by a motor assembly industry, with glass, batteries and related industries in the twenties. The clothing and building industries were also established in an attempt to meet the city's needs and the population expansion. There was also a spurt of industrial expansion after the Second World War.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> Mabin, A., " The Underdevelopment of the Western Cape, 1850-1900 " in The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape, pp. 82,83, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Baines, G., The Port Elizabeth Disturbances of October 1920, Masters Thesis, Rhodes University, 1988, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Cherry, J., The Making of An African Working Class: Port Elizabeth 1925-1963, Masters Thesis, Cape Town University, 1992., p.12.



The expansion of industrial activity in Port Elizabeth was accompanied by an increase in the number of people engaged in industrial and commercial occupations. Port Elizabeth had one of the highest population growth rates in the country, based on immigration from the surrounding areas rather than on a high birth rate. Between 1920 and 1960, Port Elizabeth was characterised by a dramatic growth in the African population, a relative decline in the white population and a non growth rate of the 'coloured' population.<sup>10</sup>

Janet Cherry argues, that the population growth however, did not correlate with employment. She further argues that there was a marked predominance of white labour in industry, in the early phase of industrialisation, and a relatively small percentage of African labour until the 1940s. Opportunities for the African population of Port Elizabeth, in industrial employment only developed in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>11</sup>

These opportunities were the result of the industrial boom which began during the Second World War and which provided a stimulus for the flow of Africans to the cities. The African labour force was needed to fill vacancies created by the white males who had gone to the war.<sup>12</sup> It was precisely at this historical juncture that Mhlaba came into the town and it did not take him long to find employment.

Mhlaba arrived in a city which had a history of worker resistance. This history began during the trading between the early white settlers and the indigenous population in the mid-nineteenth century. The very first recorded strike in South Africa was that waged by the AmaMfengu who were employed as beach labourers in Port Elizabeth. Further strikes were again implemented by the Mfengu and the Xhosa between 1852 and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.8, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 8, 11, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Magubane, The Political Economy Of Race and Class in South Africa, p. 127.

1877.<sup>13</sup> When Port Elizabeth was transforming from a centre of trade and commerce into an industrial city, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union under the leadership of Masabalala emerged as the first mass-based political organisation which threatened a general strike for a wage increase.<sup>14</sup>

The spurt of industrial expansion after the Second World War was to lead to a resurgence of local militant African trade unionism. It was at this time (the 1940s and 1950s) that the working class leadership in Port Elizabeth dominated African politics, unlike in other areas where the professional elite took the lead. This was the context in which Mhlaba was to operate in Port Elizabeth.

Mhlaba did not carry a pass nor was he required to produce any kind of permission when he arrived in Port Elizabeth, for Port Elizabeth did not have the restrictive laws which were enforced in other parts of the country. The city council had rejected anti-African legislation, pass laws, curfew and compulsory registration.<sup>15</sup>

The Minister of Native Affairs claimed that most of the African population lived in the Cape Province because the pass laws did not exist there.<sup>16</sup> That perhaps could suggest why Port Elizabeth had the highest population growth due to immigration. Correspondence from the office of the Secretary for Natives Affairs to the urban local

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<sup>13</sup> Baines, G., "Port Elizabeth's Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, 1918-1920" in Journal of Southern African Studies, vol.17, no.4, December 1991, p. 702;  
Cherry, J., Blot On The Landscape and Centre of Resistance. A Social and Economic History of Korsten, Honours Thesis, Cape Town University, 1988, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Baines, "Port Elizabeth's Industrial, p. 715:  
Cherry, Blot on the Landscape, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> The Guardian, 25/11/1943:  
Eastern Province Herald, 1/2/1946; This was Councillor Schauder's description of Port Elizabeth, as an ex-mayor there. There were subsequent debates within the PE city council on introducing registration system on Africans.

<sup>16</sup> Eastern Province Herald, 13/5/1942.

authorities early in 1942, informed that there was no urgent necessity for any alteration to the restriction of the influx of Africans in other urban areas.<sup>17</sup> The Minister of Native Affairs later announced that the government was experimenting with a relaxation of pass laws on Africans in other urban areas such as Johannesburg, and the Witwatersrand, Pretoria, Pietermaritzburg and Kimberley.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Fine and Dennis Davis argue that the war-time government relaxed the pass laws, and raised wages for black workers because it wanted to create a more stabilised work force. Higher wages were encouraged for black workers in order to extend the black consumer market, decrease state expenditure and offset labour unrest. The two authors attribute this 'generosity' to a liberal wing of the government which offered black workers the prospects of a more favourable terrain of struggle.<sup>19</sup>

The influx of Africans to Port Elizabeth in 1942 occasioned a resurgence of militancy and an epidemic of strikes. As a result **War Measure 145** was implemented which outlawed all strikes by Africans. This law gave the Minister of Labour the right to submit all disputes to arbitration at his discretion. Contravening this measure meant punishment by a prison sentence or a fine of #500.<sup>20</sup> Although this meant further exploitation of African workers, the War Measure did not deter them from participating vigorously in industrial action. Instead repression seemed to sharpen their political awareness.

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<sup>17</sup> 3/Pez - 1/3/2/15/16, Administration Regulations, The Secretary For Native Affairs, 8/3/1942.

<sup>18</sup> Eastern Province Herald, 13/5/1942.

<sup>19</sup> Fine, R. & Davis, D., Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1990, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, p. 557.

The industrialisation process brought with it factory floor struggles and increasing industrial action. The whole system of exploitation was brought into question and spontaneous outbreaks of unrest by workers took place. An official record of 304 strikes countrywide between 1939 and 1945 indicated the rising tide of working class militancy.<sup>21</sup>

Soon after his arrival in 1942, Mhlaba was employed at Nanucci Dry Cleaners. His job was to do laundry, ironing and dry cleaning. The work force at Nanucci was predominantly 'coloured' and female. These women did not waste any time in recruiting Mhlaba to join the Non European Laundry Union. Mhlaba felt that this was because they regarded him as enlightened and educated. They were hoping that his membership would benefit their union as they needed more workers to join. After little persuasion, Mhlaba joined the Laundry union illegally, without signing papers or contracts. This happened within weeks of his commencement at work.

Mhlaba did not have prior knowledge about union activities and labour politics. He did not have a theoretical or a practical framework of how the labour movement operated. He knew absolutely nothing about the workers's strikes. He had no experience of confrontations or conflicts between the employees and the employers. He did not learn about these matters from school nor from his own father who had worked in Kimberley, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. According to Mhlaba, he doubts whether his father joined any of the workers unions in Port Elizabeth, in 1941. Mhlaba does not remember discussing the matter with his father, yet he asserts that he did not get any encouragement or discouragement from him. Mhlaba, by joining the laundry union was merely following his own intuition that he was doing the right thing.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, p. 555.

<sup>22</sup> Considering that Mhlaba is in his seventies, it is understandable that he might not remember all the details about himself and particularly his father. His memory is dubious about how he joined the union. This may be that (consciously or unconsciously) he wants to create the image that no one influenced him to join it, that it was a personal decision based on self assurance.

By 1943 the laundry workers had threatened strike action if their demands for improvement in wages and conditions were not met. They demanded an all-round increase of 7s 6d which the employers rejected. The employers instead came up with a counter-proposal which offered to grant the workers two weeks' leave, a medical benefit fund and a 25% increase in their cost of living allowances. This counter proposal was unanimously rejected at a general meeting of union members. The union considered making formal application to the Conciliation Board to settle the dispute. Mohammed Desai, the union secretary released a press statement which declared they would strike if the workers' demands were not met.<sup>23</sup>

Hundreds of other Port Elizabeth factory workers in the **Boxes and Shooks Woodworking** also went on strike. For months they had been dissatisfied in their workshops, working hard for pitiful wages. They alleged that a Wage Determination was in existence, but for some obscure reason it was not applied in their own factory. Their trade union had requested a Wage Board enquiry, with no results. Instead a little minimal in wages was given to a few workers. The night shift workers then began the strike and the day shift workers followed suit.

The Department of Labour arranged for a meeting between the employers and the workers. The 'old excuses' why the employers could not pay a living wage were put forward. Arbitration was suggested but the workers stood firm and demanded an immediate increase. Eventually the employers agreed to an immediate all round increase of 2s 6d and no victimisation.<sup>24</sup>

A month later, the Port Elizabeth Non European Engineering Workers Union reported an outstanding example of solidarity among its workers. A worker who had been partly disabled by an accident was dismissed for refusing to do heavy overtime work. When his

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<sup>23</sup> The Guardian, 10/6/1943.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/12/1991.

<sup>24</sup> The Guardian, 23/2/1942

fellow-workers were told of his dismissal and that 'if they did not like it they could also go too', they walked out and their workshop had to be closed until the disabled worker was reinstated.<sup>25</sup> Vehement opposition to low wages and unjust treatment of workers by the bosses thus demonstrated the power of Port Elizabeth African workers to resist exploitation.

Fine and Davis point out that industrial workers in the war years found the conditions of labour in secondary industry hard but that those conditions were more favourable to working class organisation than before. Workers were generally more exposed to the political ideas of trade unionism, socialism and nationalism associated with modern labour movements. They were in a better position to share those ideas and put them into practise. The workers provided the main social base for the development of the black labour movement in the latter half of the 1930s and in the course of the second world war.<sup>26</sup> This certainly held true for Port Elizabeth African workers and is evident in Mhlaba's own experiences.

Mhlaba attended union meetings regularly at 92 Queens Street Port Elizabeth, in the Non European Trade Union offices. There he learnt about trade unionism, its aims and objectives, its advantages and disadvantages. He and other African workers such as Gladstone Tshume, Clifford Dladla, Reuffen Mfecane, Sam Ntunja, Adam Mati became accepted as fully fledged members in the union meetings. But, when it came to the question of signing papers like petitions or for arbitration they could not do so because under the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act, African men could not belong to trade unions. These kinds of problems were nevertheless explained and discussed with them and they consented to operate under such conditions. Thereafter they became actively involved in campaigns for the recognition of African trade unions.

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<sup>25</sup> The Guardian, 13/03/1942.

<sup>26</sup> Fine & Davis, Beyond Apartheid, p. 3.

Mhlaba seems not to remember Max Gordon, a socialist who set up seven African trade unions in Port Elizabeth in 1940.<sup>27</sup> He states that he only arrived in Port Elizabeth in 1942 and joined the laundry union a year later, and therefore he could not remember all white trade unionists, especially those he did not meet in person. He thinks that other trade unionists or communists might have referred to Gordon's work, but Mhlaba himself could not remember anything substantial about Gordon and his contribution in Port Elizabeth labour movement.

Mhlaba's regular attendance at union meetings and campaigns won him an 'executive position' as a recruiting officer in 1943. His main task was to recruit and encourage Africans to join trade unions, notwithstanding the fact that membership of such unions was illegal for them. Mhlaba states that he was very much aware of the dangers and risks involved in his task. He wants us to believe that his decision to accept the task was an informed one, because both the disadvantages and benefits of joining a union illegally had been explained to him during his recruitment and orientation in trade unionism.

Mhlaba was in open defiance of the prevailing labour law. He had personally, accepted the principles of trade unionism even though he and other African workers were seen to be forcing matters, in the sense that legally, they were not recognised in the trade unions which they supported so energetically and enthusiastically. Bravery, boldness, even stubbornness, rebelliousness are some of the features characteristic of Mhlaba in his early youth in Fort Beaufort. His willingness to join and actively participate illegally in the trade unions mirrored his character. His actions were interpreted by the authorities as militancy in an urban environment. He took the risks of exposing himself to significant governmental and employer harassment which was aggravated by his acceptance of the portfolio of a recruiting officer. By behaving in such a populist fashion, Mhlaba was therefore naturally and spontaneously expressing his antagonism towards the society which he felt was exploiting and oppressing him.

Ray Alexander recalls that she met Mhlaba during 1943, when she visited Port Elizabeth for the third time, with the aim of organising workers. The aim of their first visit in 1939

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<sup>27</sup> Hirson, B., Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947, Zed Books Ltd, London, 1989, pp 12, 39,48.

with the Editor of The Guardian, when the war had just been declared, was to promote the newspaper. When she addressed a meeting in town, the idea of organising workers came to her mind. During her second visit, in June 1940, she met Gladstone Tshume and Arnold Latti. The former had been born and brought up in Port Elizabeth and the latter was from Estonia. Both were members of the local Communist Party. They organised a meeting in New Brighton. Ray Alexander, Tshume and another speaker addressed the workers. They appealed to them to join the unions. Tshume helped Alexander to translate her speech.

During her third visit in April 1943 Alexander had meetings with factory workers. She mentions that she worked closely with Gladstone Tshume and Gilbern (sic) Davidson who organised the "coloured" workers. She believes that it was at this time that she came to know Mhlaba who was a Trade Union organiser in the Laundry Workers Union.<sup>28</sup>

Mhlaba himself remembers that there were many mass meetings for workers. Speakers from outside, like Ray Alexander, and local ones such as Gladstone Tshume, addressed them on various working class matters such as: the protection of workers' interests: what trade unions had achieved for the workers: and how blacks could improve their positions economically. The speakers always strongly urged the workers for unity and organisation in the trade unions and other progressive organisations.<sup>29</sup> The following excerpt from The Guardian illustrates the mood of industrial action in Port Elizabeth at this time.

#### **Port Elizabeth Wakes Up: Trade Union Drive**

One of the most important industrial centres in South Africa is Port Elizabeth, where a vigorous trade union is now in progress. European and Non European workers are joining up in their hundreds. This campaign will be given a big fill up during the Trades and Labour Council Conference which this year will be held at Port Elizabeth during the Easter Weekend.-----The organisation of Port Elizabeth workers has been taken up by the recently formed Trade Union Organising and Propaganda Committee.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, Ray Alexander, 8/3/1991.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/12/1991.

<sup>30</sup> The Guardian, 13/03/1942.



The Trade Union Organising and Propaganda Committee indeed embarked on a vigorous campaign to organise workers from various industrial sectors. Those employed in the motor assembly plants, in African Canning and Packing Corporation, in Tin and Sheet Metal Industry and in Cleaners and Dyers Laundries, were organised to form unions. Mass meetings of all workers, including the unorganised, were convened by local and outside trade unionists. Workers were also invited to call for information and advice at the union's office, Room 12 at the Court Chambers, 129 Adderley Street in North End.

Organisation and mobilisation of workers continued to take place despite the government's repressive measures. In 1942, an article in The Daily Dispatch criticised the government's new regulation, (the 1942 War Measure) which prohibited African workers from striking. It pointed out that the decision to implement the War Measures was a mistake which could have the most serious consequences. The article suggested that Africans could interpret the regulations as a drastic measure to crush wage demands. It was noted that the regulation was promulgated immediately after a number of strikes ended in victory for the workers. It also came at a time when there was a growing unrest in industry. The unrest was seen to be caused by the rising cost of living which was generally not compatible with the cost of living allowances for Africans. Africans therefore were beginning to organise themselves and with organisation came an awakening sense of grievance and an awareness of power. The Daily Dispatch article concluded by commenting that the recent strikes had shown that the Africans were well behaved and on the whole peacefully disposed.<sup>31</sup>

Mrs V.M.L. Ballinger represented African workers in a debate in parliament which concerned labour conditions in the Union. As Native Representative of the Eastern Cape, she argued that the Minister of Labour should agree that African workers be given full rights as employees under the Industrial Conciliation Act, if its application was to be just. She pointed out that it was unjust that one section of the labour market was not allowed to be admitted the right of labour to bargain collectively for its own conditions.

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<sup>31</sup> Daily Dispatch, 23/12/1942.

She also noted that it was almost impossible for the type of employee constituting the bulk of the country's labour force, to know what his rights were under the wage determinations, unless he had a union which would give him the information and notify the Department of Labour when those rights were infringed. She saw the application of Industrial Conciliation measures to Africans as purely permissive whilst it denied African workers participation in determining the agreement. These workers nonetheless had to pay towards the cost of the Industrial Council.<sup>32</sup> The debate went on until it became a 'no confidence debate' because the government proved incapable of removing obstacles which were in the way of African development.<sup>33</sup>

Concern was raised outside parliament, about the refusal to recognise African trade unions. This was seen as being unrealistic on the part of the employers as it had become clear that the unions were not going to disband. Debarring Africans from using the machinery established by the Industrial Conciliation Act to secure a settlement of their claims for higher wages and better working conditions, therefore meant leaving them with only one choice, that of striking.<sup>34</sup>

Enthusiastic meetings of workers in New Brighton and Uitenhage addressed by trade union leaders were frequently reported. Resolutions were passed demanding the amendment of the Industrial Conciliation Act to include Africans as employees on the same basis as other workers. Telegrams were sent to Field Marshall Smuts, Mr Madeley, the Minister of Labour, Mrs Ballinger and other Eastern Province MPs.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Eastern Province Herald, 9/4/1942.

<sup>33</sup> Daily Dispatch, 29/1/ 1946.  
Eastern Province Herald, 4/7/1947.

<sup>34</sup> Daily Dispatch, 15/12/1943.

<sup>35</sup> The Guardian, 23/3/1944.

CNETU held its second annual meeting in Port Elizabeth, in 1944. Mhlaba was not sure whether he attended this particular conference but he remembers that there were many union activities going on at the time and he attended as many as he could as a Laundry union organiser. The conference passed many resolutions among which were a call for: more sub-economic houses to be built by the City Council; for the municipality to establish a library in the townships of McNamee and Shauder; for a national minimum wage of #3 per week; for the abolition of the poll tax and pass laws in conformity with the principles of a democratic government; for the franchise to include all adult blacks; for a visa to be granted to an African to attend the World Trade Union Congress; for a social hall for McNamee to be built by the City Council from sub-economic loans.<sup>36</sup>

The long list of the resolutions clearly shows that CNETU was not concerned solely with 'pure' industrial matters. It was also concerned with political and social problems that were affecting black people in Port Elizabeth and nationally. There existed at this point, already a very close working relationship between the trade unions, the Communist Party and the ANC in Port Elizabeth.

Nationally, membership of the Communist Party increased between 1941 and 1943, respectively from 400 to 1500. It is claimed that these figures represented a stable body of politically educated activists who were expected to play a leading role in trade unions, national movements, local communities, factories and radical organisations.<sup>37</sup> Mhlaba proved to be a classic case because his illegal membership in the trade unions led him to work with communists while at the same time he also actively participated in the ANC, Iso Lomzi, the Port Elizabeth Residential Association and the Advisory Board.

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<sup>36</sup> The Guardian, 4/5/1944.

<sup>37</sup> Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, p.537.

Mhlaba's initial contact with the communists was through the union meetings he regularly attended. Clifford Dladla, who was a staunch trade unionist, gave him some booklets to read. These booklets were part of the literature issued by the Communist Party at the time. Dladla discussed these with Mhlaba and these discussions served as some kind of initiation for Mhlaba.

Dladla invited him to a meeting in town. The meeting turned out to be that of regular Sunday morning meetings of the Communist Party. This particular one had a lasting impression on Mhlaba. He found whites, 'coloureds', Indians and Africans sitting together discussing problems facing the country. They were talking about the political situation internally and internationally and were referring to each other as 'comrade'.

What struck Mhlaba was to see a white man discussing openly with an African. What was even more peculiar was to see an African challenging a white comrade to a point of saying "that is nonsense" and the latter not feeling insulted in any way by such a statement. It was such a shock for him to learn that there was no one superior to the other in that meeting. He had grown up with the belief that the white people were superior and unreliable. He then thought to himself that this was perhaps the true brotherhood which was always preached about.

Mhlaba did not need to be invited again, for thereafter he attended the Communist Party meetings on his own. He realised that their meetings had a consistent atmosphere of comradeship and discipline. This impressed him profoundly and in 1943 he joined officially. He was assigned to a branch in town which had its offices in Russell Road; by then he was living in Sidwell, a suburb nearer town. He also discovered that some of the faces he saw in those meetings were trade union officials who were in the unions that were known to be 'progressive'. These were the unions that accepted Africans as full and equal members.

The first thing Mhlaba remembers from the Communist Party meetings as an official member, was being taught how to chair a meeting, how to take minutes, how to type, how to use a duplicating machine, how to run an office, how to run a trade union. These skills were taught by comrades such as Gus Coe, Glad Tshume and others whose names he can no longer recall. He states that these comrades were very patient and good teachers.

He recalls that education was one of the priorities of the CPSA at the time and these comrades would emphasise in the meetings that 'a person must learn broadly and have general knowledge which would enable him or her to handle human nature'. This was reinforced by learning among other things about Marxism, Socialism, Capitalism and Imperialism.<sup>38</sup>

The Central Group of the Port Elizabeth Communist Party organised a series of fortnightly teach-ins on topical subjects. One of these lectures was on 'Native Labour, the Organised and Unorganised'. It was given by R. Bennum of the South African Zionist Socialist Party.<sup>39</sup> The Communist Party also held lunch hour meetings for factory workers as part of the Port Elizabeth's "Build the Party Campaign". One meeting was held off Kempton Road and Gladstone Tshume talked about the aims of the Party and the importance of the Trade Union Movement.<sup>40</sup>

The Communist Party took an active role in the Rent Protests but these will be elaborated upon later. The New Brighton group of the Party also organised a successful anti-pass meeting at Emlotheni, a popular open air venue for mass meetings. Archie Muller, the Party's national organiser, came to explain how the pass laws were operating in the cities. He urged people to fight until those iniquitous laws were repealed. Issy

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<sup>38</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 19/12/1990.

<sup>39</sup> The Guardian, 16/3/1944.

<sup>40</sup> The Guardian, 29/6/1944.

Wolfson who was the secretary of the local branch talked about the policy of the Communist Party and Tshume, the ex-chair, urged everyone present in the meeting to sign the anti-pass petition.<sup>41</sup>

Mhlaba was elected as one of the office bearers in the annual meeting of the Communist Party, in 1945. D.Dingaan was the chair, Wolfson the secretary, and B.S.du Plessis, R.Mfecane, D.S.Pillay, G. Coe, E. Schoeman, M.Desai were committee members.<sup>42</sup> Within a few months the Party again had elections. This was said to be due to a rapid growth which necessitated the re- organisation of the local district committee. Mhlaba was amongst those re-elected. The additional committee members were V.S.Mabaso, A. Opperman, J. Smouse, S. Gallant, E. Smith. Dingaan and Wolfson also now joined the committee, Desai was the new chair and Simson the new secretary.<sup>43</sup>

A week later, after the general elections, the Party was reported to have held one of its biggest meetings in Port Elizabeth, condemning the pass laws. Mhlaba was amongst those who organised the meeting. It was important for him to come from Sidwell and help other communists in organising community action in New Brighton.<sup>44</sup>

Tshume spoke in Xhosa and explained how the pass laws retarded the development of the country. He warned Port Elizabeth Africans (who were not directly affected) that they could not afford to sit still and watch the struggles of their people in other parts of the country.

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<sup>41</sup> **The Guardian**, 12/4/1945.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 19/12/1990.  
**The Guardian**, 1/2/1945.

<sup>43</sup> **The Guardian**, 21/6/1945

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 19/12/1990.

Mohammed Desai also condemned the denial by the government of the democratic right by the government for Africans to organise into trade unions. A resolution was passed for the recognition of Africans as employees under the Industrial Conciliation Act.<sup>45</sup>

Another important event that warrants mention is the Mine Workers strike which was broken up in 1946. Squads of plain clothed policemen were reported to have raided the office of the Communist Party. In Port Elizabeth, they raided not only the Party offices but also those of CNETU and PE Cape Indian Congress. They even raided the hotel room of Fred Carneson, who was a visiting member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Files of the Party, Trade and Labour Council Minutes, and passive resistance publications were confiscated.

Mhlaba and other Party members organised a meeting in New Brighton. Carneson and Sam Ntunja addressed the meeting where two resolutions were adopted. One demanded the immediate end to police raids, the return of the confiscated property, the repeal of the Riotous Assembly Act and War Measures as well as an end to other legislation designed to restrict the right of workers to organise in support of their demands. The other resolution condemned the police violence used to break the strikes, supported the strikers' demands, demanded compensation for the strike victims, recognition of African Mine Workers' Union and the opening of negotiations between the Chamber of Mines and the workers.<sup>46</sup> These developments contributed to the growth and solidification of the links between the trade unions and the Communist Party.

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<sup>45</sup> The Guardian, 27/6/1946.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 19/12/1990.

<sup>46</sup> The Guardian, 26/9/1946.  
Daily Dispatch, 23/5/1946.

Mhlaba's involvement, like that of others in the Communist Party and the trade unions, made networking between the two structures easier. Matters raised in his union were likely to be discussed in the Party meetings and vice versa. He realised that he was working with the same people most of the time. As a result industrial and political resistance was characterised by overlapping and sometimes joint action.

Mhlaba's participation in the Communist Party reflects an indiscriminate conformity to what he was offered by a brand of communists such as Gladstone Tshume, Arnold Latti, Gus Coe, who were active and influential in township politics in Port Elizabeth. His actions within the Communist Party seem to have concentrated more on local concerns than on international matters. His memories about his initial contact with the Communist Party did not mirror any significant engagement with the Communist International Movement.

It seems that he was less concerned with the ideological conflicts within the Communist Party and the Soviet Union's participation in the Second World War period. Perhaps the fact that Africans were not consulted about the war explains why Mhlaba was more absorbed in local grievances about low wages and rent increase.

The Communist Party succeeded in gaining the confidence of workers such as Mhlaba, Tshume, Mfecane, Mati and others, in Port Elizabeth. Through Mhlaba's eyes, we see a plausible picture of how the Party played a paramount role in producing a brand of militant African working class activists. Other people however portray a less favourable picture to activists, of the Communist Party. Baruch Hirson contends that 'at times the CPSA's concern about the black working class was opportunistic, condescending and insulting. He cites a case when some circles within the Party saw their role as white Communists to be that of helping and leading their African counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Max Gordon who was a socialist himself made similar criticisms about the Party. He declared that its attitude towards the War was opportunistic.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hirson, Yours for the Union, p.12

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p 78.



Nevertheless, it appears that Mhlaba and his group in Port Elizabeth had ignored the War and other political matters and instead paid attention to the economic pressures that were affecting them and their families.

The historiography of the liberation movement designates the 1940s as the watershed in African politics. Francis Meli views this period as a time when the composition of African society was changing in many ways. He cites traditional chiefs, who had been in the forefront of campaigns to improve the conditions of their communities, as having been replaced by new incumbents who were now paid servants of the government and tools of the exploiters.

He mentions that increasing industrialisation and urbanisation led to a growing African working class and this resulted in the emergence of a breed of African revolutionaries with a distinctively working-class outlook, and a new generation of intellectuals.<sup>49</sup>

When discussing the major developments of the 1940s, existing literature tends to concentrate mostly on the role of a new generation of intellectuals as the leading force in radicalising the ANC. The literature usually refers to the replacement of the ANC leadership of the 1940s by a younger generation of more assertive and militant African nationalists, mainly intellectuals, who founded the ANC Youth League.<sup>50</sup>

This thesis postulates a different viewpoint, that in effect, it was people such as Raymond Mhlaba with a distinctively working class outlook, and not the Youth League, who rejuvenated the ANC in Port Elizabeth. This argument contests the above orthodox view as regards the Port Elizabeth historiography.

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<sup>49</sup> Meli, F., A History of the ANC: South Africa Belongs To Us, Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> Everatt, "Alliance Politics of a Special Type:..", p.20.  
 Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa, p. 51,  
 Karis and Carter, Hope and Challenge 1935-1952, vol.2, p.98-107  
 O'Meara, D., Class and Nationalism in African Resistance: Secondary Industrialisation and the Development of a Mass Movement in South Africa, 1930-1950, MA Thesis, SOAS, University of Sussex, 1973, chapter 3.

Mhlaba narrates that:"

"it was in the Communist Party meetings that I heard about the importance of the ANC as a national liberation organisation. It was in those forums that the role of a National Liberation Organisation was outlined and analysed. I understood the ANC as an organisation that represented African people and I realised that I ought therefore to be a member of that organisation. Even though I was already affiliated to a political organisation, the CPSA, which was non-racial, I was made to believe that a true African communist ought to also belong to the National Liberation Organisation, in order to free his people from national oppression. I was encouraged by other Party comrades to join the ANC, and I did so in 1944."

For Mhlaba,

" It was not a question of choice but rather circumstances which made me to join the Trade Unions, the Communist Party, and then the ANC, in that order. I came to Port Elizabeth as a migrant, knowing very little about urban politics. I got exposed to trade union politics first. I concurred with what the Trade Union principles stood for and so I made a decision to join. From there I was introduced to the Communist Party and I witnessed some of its activities which profoundly affected my life. And thereafter, I got to know about the ANC ".

Mhlaba believed that as communists, he and his colleagues had influenced the direction and organisation of the ANC. He notes:

" In our meetings as communists, we had lots of discussions about the weaknesses of the ANC organisationally. I therefore joined the ANC with a purpose of improving it with the experiences I had gained and the skills I had learnt from the Trade Union and the Communist Party. This was not an individual effort. Other staunch communists and or trade unionists like Gladstone Tshume, Clifford Dladla, Sam Ntunja, Ruefen Mfecane, A.P. Mati, Caleb Mayekiso also shared the same objective.

When Mhlaba joined the ANC in 1944, the New Brighton branch was under the middle-class and moderate leadership of Pendla, Mabhija, Faku, Nkosinkulu, Jabavu, Sandla, Tshiwula. Before the 1940s, the local Port Elizabeth branches, as in the rest of

the country, had been moribund. Pendla, who was the president of the Cape African Congress, was suspended by Dr Xuma the national president. This caused ineffectuality both at a provincial and a local level as he was already co-opted by the government at the time.<sup>51</sup>

Mhlaba found the New Brighton ANC branch very weak organisationally. It was only active towards December 16, when it was preparing for the ANC national conference in Bloemfontein. Those who were members would be busy drawing up lists for donations in order to send their delegates to Bloemfontein. They would then go and collect from the white liberals in town.

Mhlaba states that he and his group mentioned above, rejected the idea of going to town to collect money from white liberals.

"We revolutionalised all of that, we had to rely on our membership. We came up with the idea of raising funds the way the churches were doing. Church goers were responsible for building the churches and for supporting their Ministers financially".<sup>52</sup>

His group therefore persuaded the branch to adopt a similar approach. Like in the church, they also had collections in all their meetings, held OoNyangantathu, (a quarterly fundraising event) and competitions and increased the branch subscription fee. The rejection of financial favours from white liberals demonstrates how Mhlaba and his group were becoming radicalised and were influencing the members of the ANC in the same way.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview, Walter Sisulu, 12/1/1991  
Baines, G., **The New Brighton Advisory Board. ca 1923 - 1952**, A paper delivered to the 5th Triennial History Workshop, Wits University, 1990, p.1

<sup>52</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990

Apart from the preparations for the Bloemfontein conference, the New Brighton ANC branch had been literally inactive. But Mhlaba notes:

" This radically changed with our presence. We held political discussions about topics which were affecting people on the ground. We selected issues in the locality such as rents, sewage, transport, things that were confronting the residents daily. It was in this way that we got in touch with the masses. It was in this way that we strengthened people's political convictions. It was in this way that we succeeded to win the confidence of the residents of Port Elizabeth. And all this was made possible on my side through the transference of organisational skills and experience from the Party ".

Another area in which Mhlaba effected change within the ANC was in the relationship with the white town councils. He tells that:

" The ANC also had a tendency to invite town mayors to come and open their provincial conferences. Doing so gave a status to the organisation. We put a stop to that. We saw that as an insult to the intelligence of the black man. We believed that the mayors did not understand and appreciate the problems of Africans. They attended those conferences with a patronising and superior attitude".

As this was a matter of racism, Mhlaba explained it as a different attitude from that of the white communists. He elaborates that :

"it was proposed therefore that a black leader, whether from the local stock or from outside Port Elizabeth, should rather come to open their conferences. Thereafter town mayors were never ever present in the ANC Provincial conferences again".

Mhlaba believes that he and his colleagues 'gave the branch a political injection. Through their political discussions, about matters affecting people on the ground, rents, transport, sewage and so on. Mhlaba comments that the people's political convictions became stronger, they began to see the ANC as their organisation. They started coming to the branch meetings'.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Mhlaba alludes to the integration of working class organisational methods with the general political activity of the people. The essence of this approach is agitation, sensation, rousing the people into action and readiness to support demands with strikes. In this, Mhlaba and his colleagues from the trade unions and the Communist Party used these organisational methods to actively take up the political education of the people and to develop their political consciousness.

An article in **The Guardian**, commented that the Port Elizabeth ANC had gained good experience. It referred to the new blood in its ranks which was to bring the Congress to the status of a mass representative movement. R.D. Naidoo of the Indian Congress also said that when the ANC becomes a mass movement, his organisation and other Non-European national organisations would seek it as a link to work hand in hand for the realisation of the political, economic and social emancipation of the Non-Europeans.<sup>54</sup> His comments undoubtedly illustrate the build up to the Congress Alliance in the following decade.

The radicalising effect on the ANC was not gladly welcomed by the old leadership in Port Elizabeth. However Mhlaba claims that most of the 'old guard' lost in the elections while others continued to be active in the branch and in the mass actions that ensued locally.<sup>55</sup>

A distinctively working class leadership from a close working link between the ANC, the CPSA and PECNETU evidently emerged in Port Elizabeth. This was most pronounced in the community struggles such as the rent protests and the New Brighton Advisory Board.

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<sup>54</sup> **The Guardian**, 26/4/1945.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

## Community Struggle

On November 21, 1944, the Port Elizabeth City Council held a meeting where it adopted a resolution to increase rentals in McNamee village by four shillings, from 16/- #1, per month.<sup>56</sup> The Council's motivation was that since it started the housing scheme for Africans in 1936, it was faced by a considerably increased charge for interest and redemption on the larger loan it had made to build the houses. The cost of the scheme had varied greatly since its inception, and administration and medical costs had cost more than was initially anticipated. This was due, among other things, to the rise in wage rates and cost of living. The city council therefore could not meet the expenditure from the original fixed rentals of 1936, hence the increase.<sup>57</sup>

Residents alleged that the city council was singling out and penalising Africans because of its #8000 deficit, by increasing rentals in McNamee. By the end of 1944, preparations were already underway to organise a conference to fight the rent increase. With the initiative of CNETU, the McNamee Anti-Increase of Rentals Action Committee was consequently formed to help organise and co-ordinate the protest.<sup>58</sup>

A campaign against the rent increase commenced at a protest mass meeting held in New Brighton. The meeting was held under the auspices of the McNamee Anti-Increase of Rentals Action Committee.

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<sup>56</sup> Pretoria Archives, NTS File 3/1/3, Council for N.E.T.U. & ANC resolution adopted in a mass meeting at Feather Market Hall on 27/1/1945: A letter from the South African Council for Child Welfare to the Minister of Native Affairs, 14/1/1945: Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>57</sup> Eastern Province Herald, 31/1/1945.

<sup>58</sup> The Guardian, 30/11/1944;  
The Guardian, 4/1/1945;  
Eastern Province Herald, 6/1/1945.

The speakers represented a variety of constituencies. There was V.S. Mabaso from the ANC, Dr E.T. Dietrich from the African People's Organisation, B. Ncapayi from the Commercial and Distributive Workers' Union, W.N. Mabija, G. Mgijima and M. Mvabaza from the New Brighton Civic Association, Sifali from the Anti-Pass Committee which was part of the CPSA campaign, B.S. Pillay from the Cape Indian Congress and S. Ntunja from the Communist Party.<sup>59</sup>

The 'coloured' people joined the protest because some of their townships such as Shauderville had been constructed on the same terms as McNamee. Those who shared a similar working class background were materially affected by the rent increase. Korsten also joined because it had both an African and a 'coloured' population. Members of the ANC and African People's Organisation (APO) who lived in Korsten, Schauderville, with the assistance of individual activists from other areas, helped to mobilise their communities against the rent increase.<sup>60</sup>

Several meetings followed in New Brighton, Korsten and Schauderville townships, mainly to discuss the residents' reaction against the city council. One such meeting unanimously condemned the increase of rents and declared the residents' earnestness to wage a determined struggle against high rents. The meeting passed a resolution to invite all the city councillors to meet the residents of New Brighton in the Feather Market Hall, on January 27. The meeting was called with the intention of persuading the council to withdraw its decision to increase McNamee rental.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The Guardian, 4/1/1945.

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>61</sup> The Guardian, 11/1/1945;  
Eastern Province Herald, 6/1/1945.

The meeting also passed a 'strongly worded' resolution addressed to the Minister of Justice and Native Affairs, deploring the increase in rentals.<sup>62</sup> The following is a copy of the contents of the letter sent to the Minister of Native Affairs by the CNETU and ANC jointly:

That having exceptional regard to the appalling economic standard (sic) of the residents of New Brighton, this meeting calls upon the Honourable Minister of Native Affairs to use his influence in urging the City Council to review and rescind its decision to increase the rents; This meeting feels that any further financial burden upon the African people will lead to untold hardships and suffering which in turn may culminate to (sic) the introduction of a wave of criminals and a flood of diseases; This meeting also calls upon the Minister to urge the City Council to consider the advisability of reducing Municipality rents by 6d per week in the following poor people's townships: McNamee village, New Brighton, Schauder, Hoy, Stuart, Holland and Dowerville.<sup>63</sup>

The resolution was adopted unanimously by both the CNETU and the ANC during twelve mass meetings held jointly between the beginning of November 1944 and January 27, 1945. The same resolution was also forwarded to the mayor of Port Elizabeth by Schauder and New Brighton residents.<sup>64</sup> The local committee of the Communist Party also passed a resolution condemning the city council's action. The committee defined McNamee as the poorest section of the community and it pledged 'wholehearted' support to CNETU in its struggle to get the city council to reverse its decision.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> The Guardian, 11/1/1945;  
Eastern Province Herald, 6/1/1945.

<sup>63</sup> Pretoria Archives, NTS Files 197/313 Representation of protest against proposed increase of rentals at New Brighton, cad, 1945.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, cad, 1945;  
Eastern Province Herald, 6/1/1945.

<sup>65</sup> The Guardian, 18/2/1945.



Mohammed Desai, the secretary of CNETU, quoted figures to prove that the loss claimed by the city council was merely a loss on paper. Desai had inside information because he was a councillor himself. He explained to residents in New Brighton that they, as Africans were charged #600 per acre of land without any services rendered when the rich people were charged #290 for the same piece of land. Whilst they paid 2s 8d per 1000 gallons of water for human consumption, the well-to-do were charged 6d for the same quantity. He informed them that the city council was planning a campaign to impose further increases on the townships, but if it thought that the Africans were alone in the battle, it was mistaken. He referred to a united front between African and coloured workers. He asserted that the front was not only to fight rents but to resist future attacks on the workers' rights.<sup>66</sup>

Eventually, residents in Port Elizabeth decided to hold a "Monster Demonstration" by way of a procession. The procession started in New Brighton and at Kempston Road for the African and 'coloured' residents in the respective areas. It was then joined by Africans and 'coloureds' from Korsten and Schauderville. From there it proceeded to the Feather Market Hall in the city centre. Thousands of Africans, 'coloureds' men, women and children, some carrying babies are reported to have marched through the city streets singing and led by men carrying banners.

The hall had been booked and paid for in advance for the protest meeting, but on their arrival, they were barred from entering its premises. They proceeded to the Donkin Reserve where resolutions were passed against increased rentals. The city council's ban on the use of the hall was also denounced.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Eastern Province Herald, 6/1/1945;  
The Guardian, 11 & 18/ 1/1945.

<sup>67</sup> Eastern Province Herald, 17/1/1945;  
The Guardian, 1/2/1945.

The rent problem dragged on into the following year. CNETU this time invited Moses Kotane from Cape Town to come and address Port Elizabeth residents in another march it had organised. Kotane was the General Secretary of the Communist Party and a trade union organiser from the early 1930s and was amongst the ANC leadership. The organisers were arrested this time, because the march was illegal. Mhlaba was amongst those arrested and he admits that they deliberately submitted their application late, probably a day before the march, in anticipation of rejection from the city council. They therefore did not wait for a reply and in defiance went ahead with the march. Samuel who was a councillor but at the same time a sympathiser of the Communist Party, paid their bail.<sup>68</sup>

It is evident from this narrative that the impact of the rent increase was felt beyond the boundaries of New Brighton, which was essentially the place it had been directed at. The 'coloured' communities in Korsten and Shauderville also joined forces to fight the city council. People such as Mhlaba, Desai, Mabaso, Ntunja played a leading role in organising and mobilising these communities. They moved freely between all three organisations viz, the ANC, the trade unions and the Communist Party and it was this overlap that contributed towards the popular and militant support of the rent protest.

It is not clear whether the city council eventually dropped the rent increase in McNamee or not, but the rent protest had a profound effect on the Port Elizabeth political organisations. The ANC particularly began to be more non-racial and assertive.

The joint venture by the African and 'coloured' communities in the rent protest was not without precedent. Baines writes that Port Elizabeth's first labour union was an inter-racial as well as a cross-class movement. It began with the formation of the Municipal 'coloured' and native Employees Association in 1919, which demanded a wage increase. Co-operation between the 'coloureds' and Africans in the field of labour relations developed and transformed the shape of black worker protest onto an organised footing.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

It ended with the formation of the Amalgamated Industrial and Commercial Coloured and Native Workmen's Union in 1920.<sup>69</sup> The events of 1945-6 thus arose out of Port Elizabeth's heritage of racial co-operation and collective protest action.

### **The Advisory Board**

The advisory boards were local government institutions set up to represent Africans residing in urban areas. They were concerned with local problems such as living conditions, rents, transport, facing Africans in the townships. Each township had its own advisory board which consisted of 'European and Non-European' members. There was the Location Superintendent, the Chairman and the Native Affairs Committee Representative, all representing the city council. There were also three 'Non-Europeans' nominated by the council and three elected by the township residents.

The advisory boards had annual elections in each township. Those elected had to go to their constituency and campaign for electoral support. They had to sell their manifestos, tell people what their intentions were, what they were aiming at and also listen to what the people desired.

Gary Baines argues that the advisory board in New Brighton was a pivotal political institution in the period 1937-1952. It was a locus of mobilising around wider socio-economic and political issues. From 1943, organisational affiliations became important in advisory board elections. This was at a time when residents in New Brighton were experiencing drastic housing shortages, increased rentals, spiralling inflation in food prices and artificially low wages which made it difficult for the working classes to make ends meet.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Baines, "Port Elizabeth's Industrials' Union", p.715.

<sup>70</sup> Baines, G., *The Contradictions of Community Politics: The African Petty Bourgeoisie and the New Brighton Advisory Board*, c. 1937-1952, A Paper presented to the Conference on "Port Elizabeth's Place in South African History and Historiography", 1992, pp. 2, 18.

In 1943, S. Mfuku, S. Ncapayi and T. Malakane contested the New Brighton advisory board elections as trade union candidates. They opened their campaign with an open air meeting which was well attended. Mfuku in his address urged that workers should take a lead in directing their own affairs. He promised that as trade unionists they could put up a determined struggle and make the voice of the workers heard. He pointed out that many workers had paid more in rent than the actual cost of the houses. He told the audience that one of their aims as trade unionists was to advocate that tenants gain ownership of the houses. Mohammed Desai, who was organising the candidates, also added in the meeting that a vote for the three candidates meant a vote for the working-class movement.<sup>71</sup> Mhlaba says that he was present in many of these meetings. By then he was already working very closely with people such as Desai.<sup>72</sup>

The new factory workers particularly brought new vigour to African labour and political organisation. The energy Mhlaba showed in the labour and later political movements can be attributed to what Laclau refers to as the transformation of rural migrants into proletarians. Having arrived in Port Elizabeth, Mhlaba, as a migrant began to experience a complexity of pressures, such as class exploitation in the new workplace. Multiple pressures of urban society such as the high cost of living, housing, education and health problems put him in a dialectical and conflictual relationship with the state. He could not meet the rising cost of living with the wage he was earning by selling his labour. An awakening sense of grievance became inevitable and in the circumstances, Mhlaba naturally reacted by asserting the symbols and ideological values of the society from which he came from.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The Guardian, 11/11/1943.

<sup>72</sup> Oral testimony in this chapter relies heavily on Mhlaba's own words. This is so because all the people mentioned, who were working with him in the period 1942-1946 have passed away. However, there has been cross checking with documentary evidence.

<sup>73</sup> Laclau, Politics, Ideology in Marxist Theory, Verso editions, London, 1970, p. 156-158.

## Conclusion

A review of the 1944-1945 activities by the Native Affairs Department which was sent to parliament stated that the increased unrest in urban centres was different from the common form of industrial unrest based on dissatisfaction with wages and conditions of employment. It was due to dissatisfaction with living conditions in the location and the laws and regulations applied in urban administration.<sup>74</sup> This was certainly the nature of black activism in Port Elizabeth.

The years between 1941 and 1946 witnessed the emergence of a trade unionist-communist oriented leadership which was to introduce a unique combination of non-racial and working class politics to Port Elizabeth. These years saw in that city the merging of industrial and political resistance against economic exploitation and racial oppression.

Mhlaba's grassroots membership when he was involved in the Non-European Laundry union, the CPSA and the ANC, played an instrumental part in forging such a political atmosphere.

Unlike the 1930s, when black opposition movements were ineffectual because of lack of co-ordination and little concerted effort to oppose the state, the 1940s revealed strong signs of the emergence of a working relationship between labour and political movements in Port Elizabeth.

CNETU was not concerned with 'pure' industrial matters but also socio-political concerns, as was revealed by its resolutions passed by Port Elizabeth African unions, at the annual conference held in 1944. The Communist Party was not only concerned with recruitment and organising meetings for workers, it also took up anti pass and food

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<sup>74</sup> Daily Dispatch, 20/3/1945.

rationing campaigns.<sup>75</sup> Most significantly, the transformation process in the Port Elizabeth ANC from a moribund into an active branch was initiated by a trade unionist-communist oriented group, and Mhlaba played a significant role in that as well.

According to Lenin, 'all class war' agitation is conducted with regard to every concrete example of political oppression. This oppression affects all classes of society and manifests itself in various spheres of life and activity. Therefore the task of revolutionaries (communists) in developing the political consciousness of the working class would be incomplete if they do not undertake the organisation of the **political exposure** of the state **in all its aspects**.<sup>76</sup> (his emphasis). It is apparent that this is just what Mhlaba and his fellow revolutionaries attempted to do.

The New Brighton advisory board also showed signs of being a locus of African political activity as evidenced by the trade union candidates in it. Most of all, the Rent Protest clearly testifies to the overlapping core membership of CNETU, the CPSA and the ANC as well as racial co-operation which resulted in a stronger, organised, popular and militant resistance.

This was the scenario where the seeds of the foundations of the Congress Alliance were sown by people such as Mhlaba, Tshume, Ntunja, Mabaso, Dladla, Mfecane and Desai, who were communists, trade unionists, ANC and Cape Indian Congress activists.

The period before 1946 reveals to us the emergence of the militant working class element which was beginning to give a new lease of life and mass appeal to the ANC in Port Elizabeth. This revelation is contrary to the conventional viewpoint that it was the fluence of the Youth League that slowly moved the ANC into a more radical posture.

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<sup>75</sup> The Guardian, 27/6/1946.

<sup>76</sup> Lenin, V.I., What is to be done?, Moscow 1964, p.55

And in any event, the Youth League did not develop itself into a mass organisation in its formative years. It saw its task as 'bolstering the organisation of the Congress itself.'<sup>77</sup>

In looking at the period after 1946, we shall continue to focus on Mhlaba's leadership role in political and labour movements and on his contribution in the founding of the Congress Alliance.

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<sup>77</sup> Giffard, C.J., " **The Hour of Youth Has Struck** " : The ANC and the Struggle for a Mass Base 1943-1952,"Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984, p.28.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### UNITY IN ACTION, THE CONGRESS ALLIANCE: 1947-1953

##### **The 'Task Force'**

The strength of the ANC in the Eastern Cape region and in Port Elizabeth particularly, is attributed by historians to a combination of factors. These include: the ethnic homogeneity of the local (African) population; the deep historical roots of modern political culture; the more relaxed legal environment; the strength of trade unionism and the existence of a large concentration of African industrial workers in Port Elizabeth; the stability of family life; the extent of conversion to christianity and the lack of divisive communist influence in African politics'.<sup>1</sup> Other scholars emphasise the role of individuals in the leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Without underestimating other factors, I would stress the efforts, hard work, courage, dedication and sacrifices of those like Mhlaba who took an active part in the local resistance movements. The preceding chapter shows that it was not only the local leadership but equally the rank and file membership which secured this special status of the ANC in the Eastern Cape.

Evidence in the preceding chapter clearly demonstrates that it was the communist and trade union oriented group which played an influential role in transforming the ANC into a mass based organisation in Port Elizabeth. They organised popular resistance from the early to mid forties, through the years of the Youth League in the later forties, to the early fifties.

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<sup>1</sup> Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa, pp 45, 47.  
Carter, D., "A Comparative Analysis of the Organisation, Leadership and Participation in the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal", ICS, pp.76-77.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhart, G. M. & Karis, T., From Protest To Challenge, vol.4, Stanford University, 1977, pp. 116-7;  
Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa, p. 52



From 1947, Mhlaba continued to work very closely with Gladstone Tshume, Sam Ntunja, Reufen Mfecane, Adams P. Mati, Clifford Dladla and Mohammed Desai. Now he worked with them at leadership level, whereas before he has worked as a grassroots activist. Most of these people were, at the same time communists, trade unionists and ANC leaders. Mhlaba himself simultaneously became the chairperson of the New Brighton ANC in 1947 and the secretary of the local branch of the Communist Party in the same year. He continued as an organiser of the Laundry Worker Union, a position he had held since 1943. Tshume was the chairperson of the Communist Party, the organiser of the Textile Workers Union and the treasurer of the ANC. Ntunja, Mati and Dladla were similarly in the executive of the ANC and in the trade unions and the Communist Party. Mfecane was also in the ANC but was more of a trade unionist. Desai was himself a trade unionist, a communist and he worked as a leader in the Cape Indian Congress. These people worked as a team and in Mhlaba's words, they were "like a task force group".<sup>3</sup>

Mohammed Desai is purposefully included in the 'task force' because he fitted in well with the communist-trade union group, which played a significant role in the founding of the Congress Alliance. In an endeavour to explain why the Eastern Cape and Port Elizabeth in particular, has been the most organised and militant region, Sisulu mentioned the combination of dynamic and humble personalities in the persons of Raymond Mhlaba, Gladstone Tshume, Jimmy Njongwe and Mohammed Desai. Sisulu remembers Desai as,

"a hard working person who was able to mobilise and organise mass demonstrations. He was good in both the field of workers and in the ANC. Although he was not in the ANC, he worked closely with it. When the New Brighton ANC had problems, Desai helped it. His status as a city councillor meant he could not be ignored by the city council or the police, and this gave a great deal of prestige to the ANC".

Sisulu often stayed with him during his visits in Port Elizabeth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Walter Sisulu, 12/1/1991.  
See Cherry's thesis for a more critical view of Mohammed Desai. pp 85-89.

The spirit that was already derived from the process of radicalisation of the New Brighton ANC (outlined in the previous chapter) and from trade union action, encouraged many workers to join the ANC. Congress and trade union activities were often combined to the extent that people thought that they were one and the same thing. When trade union meetings were called, large numbers attended as they did ANC meetings, because people could not differentiate between the two.<sup>5</sup>

Henry Fazzie concedes that there was a time in the late 1940s when people could not differentiate between the meetings of the unions and the ANC. He himself was able to differentiate because he was a shop steward. Fazzie was introduced by Tshume to trade union politics. Tshume organised the textile workers in places as far as King Williams Town, where Fazzie was working in the Good Hope Textile factory. It became known among the workers that Tshume was also in the ANC. When everybody began to talk about the ANC at the time, Fazzie, like others also joined. He joined partly as a result of Tshume's influence in trade union action but also because it was during a time when the ANC Youth League was particularly popular. Fazzie was in a group that was fired from the textile factory he was working in, in 1951. Thereafter he came to Port Elizabeth where he continued to work with Tshume and Mhlaba in the ANC and in the trade unions.<sup>6</sup>

Mhlaba acknowledges that as trade unionists and communists in the ANC, they as the executive influenced the branch to support the trade unions because its membership was to a large extent the working class.<sup>7</sup> This was different from other areas where there was a much stronger African middle class influence and domination. In Port Elizabeth, the influence of the latter was quite weak and in the process of a power struggle, they lost effectiveness in the ANC and in the Advisory Board. In his elucidation why the

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, Henry Fazzie, 19/7/1991.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Henry Fazzie, 19/7/1991.  
Daily Dispatch, June 1951.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

Eastern Cape had an extraordinary response during the 1952 Defiance Campaign, Lodge attests that while the ANC in other centres was led by a professional elite, in Port Elizabeth it was dominated by working class leaders.<sup>8</sup>

The same principle applied with regard to the ANC and its relationship with the unions and the Communist Party. Mhlaba claims that the 'task force' believed that all three organisations were representing the interests of the same people, the working class. As a result most of the opposition to the government, whether by the ANC, CPSA or PECNETU, was characterised by persuasive language, such as 'calling upon the working class and the progressive movements to rally their forces and present a united front against the fascist onslaught'.<sup>9</sup> Mhlaba recalls that there was even a joke about Port Elizabeth activists. He says they were called a mixed bag because it could never be told which was which, the Communist Party, the ANC or the trade union.<sup>10</sup>

From 1947, Mhlaba and his group took over from the ANC leadership of Nkosinkulu, Mabija, Faku, Sandla, Kondile, Mfuku, Malakane and others who had been moderate and middle-class. Edward Feit defined the African middle class as the

"African bourgeois, usually the intellectual, who seeks to provide leadership in African organisations such as the ANC. But whatever his sincerity and his capacity for leadership he is separated from the African masses by the very achievement that gives him elite status".<sup>11</sup>

Feit's definition however misinterprets the importance of the occupational status of the ANC leaders, particularly those who founded the Youth League.

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<sup>8</sup> Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa, p.51.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.  
The Guardian, 23/1/1947; 6/2/1947; 13/2/1947; 20/2/1947; 13/3/1947.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>11</sup> Feit, E., African Opposition in South Africa: The Failure of Passive Resistance, Hoover Institution Publications, Stanford, 1967, chapter 3.

Mhlaba maintains that:

"as a group united with common interests, we (the 'task force') discussed who was suitable for which portfolio and we voted for each candidate accordingly, that means to say that we caucused the elections before-hand. This we did without necessarily dictating or imposing our wishes on the membership. We did it in good spirit and good faith, and mainly with the intention of improving the ANC".

Mhlaba elaborated on their influence within the ANC:

"As the task force, we wanted the ANC branch to be alive throughout the year, instead of operating only towards the December national conference. We wanted political work to continue from January to December. General meetings were regular, at least once a week or even in-between when there was need. Executive meetings took place once a week. The executive introduced the idea that the branch money be deposited with a bank and, occasionally, financial statements were requested from the bank and shown to the membership. The treasurer was in that manner stopped from keeping the branch money in his pocket. We applied the discipline and skills with regard to office work we had learnt from the communist Party and the trade unions.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Royal Visit**

The first thing he remembers that they had to deal with, was the royal visit. In March 1947, the British royal family began a journey to see not only all parts of the country, but also all of its population groups. They visited Cape Town, Lovedale, Pretoria, Durban, the Transkei, Port Elizabeth and other places. The visitors were reported to have had a warm welcome all over. There were feasts which were interspersed with singing and dancing. 'Nkosi Sikelela i Afrika' was among the songs sung by Africans for the king and queen and their family.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>13</sup> Imvo Zabantsundu, 15/3/1947.

As in other areas, the Port Elizabeth city council bought a cow for its 'natives' to be slaughtered for the welcoming of the King. Between Ntshekisa and Uitenhage roads, another road was especially constructed for the use by the king and his family on their trip to New Brighton. The road was named the King's road. The city council chose the best parts of the township for the royal eyes; this included Limba's place because Limba was an influential man who owned a beautiful house. The squalid corrugated iron structures in Red and White locations and the single men's quarters where people were living in abject conditions were not part of the sight-seeing trip.

The Communist Party of New Brighton therefore viewed the visit negatively. It advocated a boycott of the Royal welcome. The Party called meetings of the residents and attempted to expose the motives of the city council. The communists also explained to the residents how the monarchy lived in England. They informed the people that there was a hierarchy and the royal family enjoyed privileges whilst the majority of other people in England were suffering.

The Communist Party believed that the city council was creating a false impression about Africans in South Africa. The feasts and the singing and dancing was only a facade, behind which lay misery and suffering. The ministers who were accompanying the royal family on the trip did not have the interests of Africans at heart. A decision to show their opposition to this sort of propaganda was therefore discussed amongst the communists as well as in ANC circles. Mhlaba, as the ANC chairperson, appealed to his membership not to participate in the occasion. He made a request that people should not eat the meat and food that was to be offered and that they should not be part of the singing and dancing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 16/7/1991.  
The Guardian, 23/1/1947.

The royal visit was given wide coverage by the media. Numerous meetings in Port Elizabeth's townships regarding the king were reported. One of them was public and was held in the T.C. White Hall in New Brighton. Mr P. Mati who represented both the ANC and the Communist Party presided over the meeting. Dr D.L. Ferguson, who was the Minister of Health, and C.T. Boast, the Superintendent, were also present. The Bloemfontein ANC branch had taken a resolution that Africans should not participate in the royal welcome. A motion that the meeting endorse the latter resolution was proposed. This was supported by a small section of people but these were ultimately defeated. The non-participation motion was strongly denounced, especially by elderly men who pleaded for whole hearted participation. Many people in the meeting were also reported to have left in disgust when the non participation motion was proposed. The participation motion was thus carried unanimously by those who remained in the meeting.<sup>15</sup> This meeting obviously reflects that the support of the Communist Party was not as high as its members may wish us to believe.

After the royal visit, several articles about the communists appeared in the Imvo Zabantsundu newspaper. One reported that the very people who were urging the residents of New Brighton not to participate in the visit were among the first to go and welcome the king. They were allegedly the ones who ate the meat and the food more than anyone else, 'until their stomachs turned red'. The article read that the warm welcome the king received from the residents clearly proved that the communists lacked support in New Brighton.<sup>16</sup>

Imvo Zabantsundu articles went on to say that 'it was not known how things were in other areas but in Port Elizabeth the resistance movement was "in the hands of clay dolls who did not know how the door of a school was painted inside". The communists were frankly described as "people who did not know what they were doing". That "they were people who were fooling around not knowing where they were going". All the leaders

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<sup>15</sup> Imvo Zabantsundu, 15/3/1947.

<sup>16</sup> Imvo Zabantsundu, 15/3/1947.

of the Communist Party were alleged not to know what the time was. They were described as people who did not even have houses of their own. They were squatting in other people's houses. The author of the article wondered how squatters "who could not even lead themselves' could ever 'think that they could lead the whole nation".<sup>17</sup>

Some of the above allegations bear upon Mhlaba. At the time he did not have a house of his own. He was still 'squatting' in Sidwell. Mhlaba, like Tshume, Mati, Mfecane and others in his group, did not have 'professions', if that was what was meant by people 'who did not know how the schools looked like'. Mhlaba, however did attend school and was a standard nine drop out.

Gladstone Tshume, the chairperson of the Communist Party, too took offence at the above statements. This was debated in the branch and finally he and Mhlaba were delegated to take legal action. They sought legal advice from Kaplan and Lans who were popular lawyers and communists themselves. The latter initially thought that the Party did not have a good case possibly because some of the membership could have been seen in the audience that gave the royal family a welcome. Tshume and Mhlaba were certainly not convinced that their membership could be that irresponsible after the talks and appeals in the branch meetings they held. Besides, the articles were also defamatory of the Party leadership. Mhlaba and Tshume then went on to seek senior legal advice from Advocate Harry Snitcher, from Cape Town, who was also a communist. Snitcher thought that they had a good case. A statement suing the Port Elizabeth correspondent of the Imvo Zabantsundu was issued.

Mhlaba claims that in the end, the Port Elizabeth Communist Party branch received a cheque from the trust that was running the newspaper. He relates that they wrote back and demanded that the newspaper should apologise publicly. Its correspondent in Port Elizabeth was thereafter expelled.

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<sup>17</sup> Imvo Zabantsundu, 15/3/1947.

The Communist Party bought a microphone with the money which they used in their meetings at Emlotheni. 'That was the first time we had something of our own' comments Mhlaba. He adds that although the microphone was bought by the communists, the congressites also used it in their own meetings.<sup>18</sup>

Research on the immediate articles in Imvo Zabantsundu did not corroborate Mhlaba's testimony about the public apology to the Party and the expulsion of its correspondent. However, although the story of the Royal Visit might have been more elaborate and complicated than we are made to see through Mhlaba's eyes, the essence of the relating the event is to reveal the visibility of a close working relationship between the communists and the congressites that were to found the Congress Alliance.

The rootedness of the relationship between the key elements of the Congress Alliance in the context of the struggle, was nurtured and matured in the capable leadership of the region and branch. If elsewhere, the ANC was radicalised by the Youth League, then in Port Elizabeth it was radicalised by this unique relationship.

In his own words Mhlaba asserts that:

"I joined the Youth League very late in 1944, the same year I joined the ANC. I remember becoming the officer for propaganda at some point, it must have been 1946 or 1947, round about then. I know that Sam Ntunja, Thami Tshume, Ntsangani, Khephe, Fanele Mati, a gentleman called Berreng from Lesotho, and Alvern Bennie were also in the Youth League branch. Gladstone Tshume and Clifford Dladla were not in the Youth League simply because they were not youth; because of their age. they were old chaps and the two were the only ones from the task force that did not qualify to be in the Youth League. I must point out though that the New Brighton Youth League was a small branch which was not popular up until 1949. It was represented in the mother body in the same way as the Women's League when it was formed".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 16/7/1991.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 16/7/1991.



Even nationally, the Youth League in its formative years did not develop itself into a mass based organisation. Also, there has been very little information available about individual branches, and how they operated.<sup>20</sup> Mhlaba's account of his own participation provides some accounts of events that took place in Port Elizabeth.

Mhlaba further maintains that:

"The Youth League had discussions on Marxism in New Brighton. When the branch members had to choose a colour for its membership cards, we all unanimously chose red. The Port Elizabeth branch was the only Youth League branch that was 'red'. Here, we have been politically left, all left, too much, we were just one, all left. We pushed that even at provincial level. When the Youth League chaps in other regions, O' Madiba noo Xhamela (the Mandelas and Sisulus) moved the motion that the communists be expelled at the ANC national conference in 1949, I was present and that did not have any significant effect on our branch because I was there as both the ANC delegate and a 'red' youth delegate". We were not worried because we did not have problems with Communists in our area".<sup>21</sup>

Joe Mati who joined the New Brighton Youth League in 1953, also remembers Mhlaba and his 'red' group attending a Youth League conference in Queenstown. They were neatly dressed in Red ties which symbolised their connection to the Communist Party. Mati asserts that this group was influential and dominated the Youth League.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Giffard, C., **"The Hour of Youth Has Struck": The African National Congress and the Struggle for a Mass Base 1943-1952** ", Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984, pp.1, 28

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990  
Out of the list of people Mhlaba mentioned to have been in the New Brighton Youth League in the late 1940s, Alvern Bennie was the only one still alive who could be traced. Unfortunately out of numerous arrangements and appointments that were fixed for an interview, not a single one of them could he honour, the many times I went to Port Elizabeth which is my home town. He appeared like a very busy person who has recently returned from exile and had to attend to his families and other businesses.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Joe Mati, 7/9/1992.

Tom Lodge writes that in the Eastern Cape, the Youth League began in late 1948, with the establishment of a branch at Fort Hare. A year later a branch was formed in New Brighton. He then singles out Dr Njongwe as the youth leaguer 'to play a prominent role in the Eastern Cape politics'. His contention is based on the notion that the Youth League tended to draw its membership from young professionals. Njongwe was the only African doctor in Port Elizabeth. He was one of the first medical graduates of the University of Witwatersrand. He had joined the Youth League in Johannesburg whilst a student there and had served on its national executive. By the time he came to open his practice in Port Elizabeth in 1947, he was already a politician of notable stature and he immediately assumed a leading role in the local affairs of the Congress. Lodge also attributes the establishment of the basis of mass organisation in Port Elizabeth to Njongwe and Robert Matji.<sup>23</sup>

There is little if any information about Njongwe's engagements in the New Brighton Youth League even though he was a prominent Youth Leaguer of 'notable stature' by the time he came to Port Elizabeth. Mhlaba and Mati's evidence about the 'red youth' therefore casts serious doubts on Lodge's theory, which was clearly an attempt to present a homogenous perception of the Youth League.<sup>24</sup> In the Eastern Cape, the Youth League had a different character which enabled it to play a unique role in pioneering alliances with other formations.

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<sup>23</sup> Lodge, ***Black Politics in South Africa***, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Matji who like Njongwe is credited for establishing the basis for mass organisation in Port Elizabeth, is still alive and an exile in Maseru, unlike Dr Njongwe who died and cannot answer for himself. Matji is one critical person whose input could have surely given insight to the theory of the 'red youth', as well as Njongwe's involvement or non-involvement in the New Brighton Youth League and other political activities in the area. Matji was the secretary of the New Brighton ANC branch in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Mrs Njongwe, the wife of the late doctor told me that she gave Matji a gramophone which had speeches of Sisulu and Moroka in Port Elizabeth, during the 1952 riots. Attempts were made to contact him telephonically and via the mail, but to no avail. I was nonetheless denied funding which would have enabled me to travel to Maseru and interview him.

According to Mhlaba, when Dr. Njongwe arrived in Port Elizabeth in 1947, he and Tshume immediately went to his house to recruit him for the ANC. They wanted him to be in their branch as they had heard that Njongwe had been active in politics in Johannesburg, prior coming to Port Elizabeth, and also because of his status as a doctor. Njongwe was elected as the branch treasurer in 1948. Thereafter he was elected at provincial level but he continued to work closely with the local leadership. Mhlaba does not remember him holding any executive position in the New Brighton Youth League as such.<sup>25</sup>

However, there is evidence that there were tensions between Njongwe and the local leadership. Lodge talks about the conflict between Njongwe and the left wing leadership in Port Elizabeth which was illustrative of the limitations of mainstream Congress radicalism. He does not elaborate on this except mentioning earlier that Njongwe found himself at odds with the local brand of the leadership, over the question of a stay-at home.

The stay-at-home was a response by the ANC to the city council's imposition of a curfew and the banning of all public meetings in Port Elizabeth, both of which were a sequel to the Defiance campaign. The stay-at-home was called by the local leaders in Njongwe's absence. People accepted the call with enthusiasm in many meetings that were held in New Brighton, Korsten, Veeplaas and Walmer. The stay-at home was to last indefinitely, 'until God Almighty has changed the hearts of the city councillors'. Lodge contends that Njongwe succeeded in reasserting his authority in the local branch, for in the end, as a result of his persuasion, the proposed indefinite stay-at home lasted for a day.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.  
Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa*, pp 61,54.

<sup>26</sup> Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa*, pp. 61, 54.

David Carter also refers to a dispute between Njongwe and three former members of the Communist Party during the 1952 Defiance Campaign. He does not mention the names of the Communists, but points out that they showed themselves more anxious to promote radical unity rather than doctrinal orthodoxy.<sup>27</sup>

Walter Sisulu as well, mentions that during his numerous visits to Port Elizabeth, it came to his attention that there were sharp differences between Njongwe on the one hand and Mhlaba and G. Tshume on the other. Sisulu used to go and address people there as this was a way of building local branches, that is by getting national speakers to come and address local membership. In 1949, Mhlaba, Tshume and Njongwe invited Sisulu as the national General Secretary to come and address the people in Port Elizabeth. Sisulu states that the three were working as a team, but Mhlaba and Tshume were more like twins.<sup>28</sup>

The nuances within the Youth League clearly show that the Youth League was never homogenous. In the Eastern Cape the communists were a hegemonic group within the League, a factor that helped influence the Youth League's attitude towards the Communist Party and the trade unions. The Youth League in Port Elizabeth was able to play a pivotal role in influencing the Congress Alliance. This is certainly a different viewpoint from the dominant theory which advocates that the first signs of the revitalisation of the ANC in the 1940s, came from an Africanist-minded, urban based intelligentsia.<sup>29</sup>

However, although the Youth League elsewhere also influenced the Congress Alliance, in some cases, it was anti- communist, unlike that of Port Elizabeth.

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<sup>27</sup> Carter, "A Comparative Analysis", p.83

<sup>28</sup> Interview, Walter Sisulu, 12/1/1991.

<sup>29</sup> Marks, S. & Trapido, S., The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in South Africa, Longman Group, UK Limited, London, 1987, pp 46-47.

Examples of mass action and other important events that took place between 1947 and 1953 will be selected and explained to demonstrate how the foundations of the broad Congress Alliance solidified. The strengthening Alliance was influenced by the changing polity, post war conditions, and new leadership in Port Elizabeth, which included Mhlaba.

### **Food Protest: 1947**

During the Second World War food became scarce, and as a result supermarkets tended to stock large quantities but, discriminated when selling their supplies. Mhlaba recalls that there were instances when some commodities would only be available to white customers and not to black customers. This was in many parts of the country, but especially in Cape Town.<sup>30</sup> The Communist Party took this as one of its concerns. It called on the government for food rationing and for a Ministry of Food. It demanded that food be distributed fairly by ration cards to all and that there to be no differentiation. The Party also warned that the food shortage would lead to a system of black marketeering which would inevitably lead to graver shortages of food for the working people. All workers were therefore encouraged to protest vigorously against this.<sup>31</sup>

A procession of about three thousand people consequently marched through the streets of Port Elizabeth. They demonstrated their discontent with the government's lack of a proper food distribution scheme. The residents demanded that the government should introduce rationing, restore the mobile food vans which had been selling food indiscriminately and also establish a Ministry of food so as to ensure the equal distribution of commodities in short supply. The procession ended with a well attended meeting at the Donkin Reserve.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 28/12/1992

<sup>31</sup> The Guardian, 27/6/1946.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 28/1/1992

The procession was led by Desai, Mhlaba, J. Johnson, B. Hutton and D. Dingaan. They were charged with organising, controlling and participating in a procession without the permission of the city council. They all pleaded not guilty on the grounds that they were not aware that the city council had refused to grant them permission earlier.<sup>32</sup>

Mhlaba remembers them organising themselves into a united front against the government. He claims that although most of the organisers represented the Communist Party, Hutton was a Trotskyite, and a teacher by profession. He remembers vaguely that there was some link with the teachers' association. Johnson was an Indian who stayed in South-End before the Group Areas Act of 1950. Dingaan was a loyal communist and he was in the ANC.<sup>33</sup> From the procession during the food protest, one could sample communists, ANC members, teachers, Africans, Indians and whites. Such a heterogeneous group represented a foretaste of the coming Congress Alliance.

### **Laundry Strike, 1948**

Mhlaba was working at Nanucci Dry Cleaners when the laundry strike broke out in 1948. It will be remembered that he became a member of the laundry union soon after being employed. Membership of African men in this union had been regarded as illegal in terms of the Industrial Conciliation Act. At the time of the strike, Mhlaba was deeply involved in trade union work. He was among the organisers working with Mohammed Desai who was the General Secretary of the Laundry Unions.

The laundry workers demanded an increase in wages and better working conditions. The strike, which went on for almost a month, was prolonged by deadlocks between the employers and the union negotiators. Atlas Cleaners, Nanucci Cleaners, One Day

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<sup>32</sup> **The Guardian**, 15/5/1947; 7/8/1947;  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 28/12/1992.

Cleaners and other laundries were all involved and the strike turned into a big event. An enormous amount of publicity was consequently generated probably because the white public was inconvenienced by the strike. The strikers picketed and also fought with police and scab labour in the city centre.<sup>34</sup>

Mhlaba was deeply involved in the strike. He narrates that:

"I was amongst those who fought scab labour. When the employers realised that the strike was 'hot', they went around in Walmer and other places looking for people to employ. They gathered these people and drove them in vans to the factories. We then saw smoke from our factories' chimneys and wondered who was working inside, was it the bosses themselves?, could they really do our jobs themselves? We then discovered that it was scab labour and we went inside to get the scabs out. We did not even think about the consequences, we just fought like nobody's business".

Mhlaba elaborates that:

"I and other workers, I can't remember who they were, got arrested under the Riotous Assembly Act. The Laundry Union secured legal representation for us and as a result we got away with a suspended sentence. I remember that Betty du Toit who was the National Secretary of the Laundry Workers' Union, came all the way from Headquarters in Johannesburg to reinforce the workers spirit while at the same time she tried to resolve the situation. In any event I got sacked and my wife had to support our family whilst I was looking for another job".<sup>35</sup>

Research on the strike shows that it became apparent that although the wage demand was met, the employers won in another respect. The employers succeeded during the strike in getting rid of many of the union members, including some of the 'agitators' such as Raymond Mhlaba. About eighty out of hundred and ninety employees who escaped

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.  
Cherry, *The Making of An African Working Class*, pp.108-110.  
Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

imprisonment had come out were not re-employed. However, the Trade and Labour Council in Port Elizabeth saw the outcome of the strike as a victory in the sense that it had benefited the union in the sense that its credibility as a negotiator and as a co-ordinating body in support of the strike had been established.<sup>36</sup>

Mhlaba believes that although he was eventually sacked the strike was a success. He claims that they as strikers not only fought the scabs, but that they also distributed pamphlets all over Port Elizabeth including the white suburbs, in an attempt to get the public to support them. Other unions helped them with financial support and others helped with picketing. Many people stopped taking their clothes to the laundries. He says that the mere fact that the strike lasted for almost a month was an indication of the people's unfailing support for the strikers. And to a great extent the strike received mass support.<sup>37</sup>

Cherry makes a point that the nature of the strike itself was non-racial. It indicated the emergence of a working class consciousness which was not 'Africanist' in style and this was to characterise the militant Port Elizabeth unions of the late 1940's and in the SACTU period.<sup>38</sup> Mhlaba's specific role in this cannot be overemphasised.

### **Bus Boycott, 1949**

The Port Elizabeth community relied on buses owned by the South African Railways (SAR) for transport to and from work. There was no other transport service like today's kombi-bus service.

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<sup>36</sup> Cherry, *The Making of An African*, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>38</sup> Cherry, *The Making of An African*, p.13.



As one commuter commented:

"Railways employed only whites as drivers, despatchers and inspectors. This bus service was very irregular. We waited for hours at the bus-stops. The bus queues were long yet empty buses would pass by, leaving the our people behind to be late for work. Some of these chaps, the drivers and conductors were rude and arrogant. They did not care about our people. Sometimes the bus was scheduled to leave at eight, and the driver would leave at five-to -eight or sometimes would leave late when it pleased them to do so. Then the fare went up without any warning to us. The people responded by embarking on a boycott".<sup>39</sup>

Although the boycott was initiated by the ANC, a broader committee was set up which brought together all the organisations existing in New Brighton. Mhlaba asserts that:

"it was a good strategy to work with other organisations because the various members committed themselves to the proposed boycott. This not only prevented the existence of arm chair critics, it was also a way to solidify mass action".<sup>40</sup>

An Action Committee comprising representatives from New Brighton organisations was elected in a meeting. Among these committee representatives were from the ANC and its Youth League and the Unity Movement. Mhlaba led the Action Committee. Dr Njongwe, Gladstone Tshume and W. Ximiya were also in the committee representing the ANC and W.M. Tsotsi representing the Unity Movement.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Interview, Archi Mshoti, 21/12/1990.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 29/12/1990.  
Lodge, **Black Politics in South Africa**, p. 54.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.  
**The Guardian**, 21/4; 5/5; 26/5; 16/6; 23/6; 20/7; & 11/8/1949.

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.  
Lodge, **Black Politics in South Africa**, p.47.

The committee organised support from different sources. It asked Mrs Ballinger, the Eastern Cape Native Representative, to exert pressure on the Minister of Transport. Ballinger managed to get an interview with the minister who suggested a take over of the route by a private enterprise. Mhlaba explains that, 'no African could afford to run the bus service in New Brighton then, unlike the Tshangisas, and the Qeqes today, Africans during those days did not have money'.

Another mass meeting was subsequently called by the committee where it was resolved to boycott the trains as well as they were also under the SAR. Residents were to walk to and from the work-places, which were mainly in town. The employers were asked not to victimise late-comers. Mhlaba states that, the African people were used to walking long distances, back from the olden days and in the countryside. Therefore it was not so much a worry this business of walking to and from town'.

The Action Committee also sent a telegram to Dr Xuma to rally support on their behalf. Dr Xuma and Professor Z.K. Matthews, respectively, ANC national and provincial leaders paid a visit to New Brighton. They addressed a mass meeting where they expressed their support for the bus and the train boycott.<sup>42</sup>

The boycott lasted for a month and the people again began to use the SAR buses and trains, with some improvements in the service. The final impact of the boycott came, however in the end, after a few years of waiting, Bay Passenger Service, a private company took over. Mhlaba claims that they as the Committee exploited the situation and demanded that the new company employ black people on the same conditions as the former white employees. The wages and other benefits were to remain the same for the employees and he declares that the company was reasonable and polite enough to yield to their demands.

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<sup>42</sup> Lodge, **Black Politics in South Africa**, p.47;  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

"The new company requested some time from the bus committee to train blacks as inspectors, despatchers and conductors. The New Brighton community fortunately had people who could drive buses. We then called our people to a meeting in T.C. White Hall where they were informed about the possibility of employment as drivers for the Bay company. It was made clear to these people that the arrangement was made because of the efforts of the community and for that reason, they had to serve the community. Amongst those who were present in the meeting and who became the first black bus drivers were people such as Stanley Marwanqa, Pasha, Holo and Tonjeni",

as told by Mhlaba.<sup>43</sup> An interview with Stanley Marwanqa confirmed this.<sup>44</sup>

### **Frances Baard**

It is appropriate at this point also to include Frances Baard's own story about her activism because it shows how the Congress Alliance in Port Elizabeth solidified. She was popularly known as Ma-Baard. She worked as a domestic servant before she joined the factory work force. One day on her way to work she passed the single men's quarters in New Brighton, next to the Red and White locations. It had rained the previous night and it was a very cold winter's morning. She saw men sleeping on the ground in between the puddles of water. One man came from inside the rooms to fetch some water. She asked him why those people were sleeping that way. The man responded that it was very full inside the hostels. These were the people who came from the Transkei and Ciskei. They had arrived in the middle of the night and could not find accommodation.

She remembers standing there for a long time with tears falling down her cheeks. The scene perturbed her and for the whole day she thought about it, and ways of solving this problem. When she got back from work, Mhlaba, Dr Njongwe, Tshume and Matji were at her house in Aggrey Road, 'busy with their stuff'. They were using a bedroom in her house as their (ANC) office, as she was staying alone in a four-roomed house.

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<sup>43</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.  
Interview, Stanley Marwanqa, 27/12/1991.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Stanley Marwanqa, 27/12/1991.

Before she had offered the use of one of her bedrooms for an ANC office, Ma-Baard had attended ANC meetings occasionally at Emlotheni. She did not really understand what Mhlaba, Matji, Tshume, Njongwe and other leaders, were talking about. She says that she was not clear about politics then. This particular day the ANC leaders noticed that she was not happy. They enquired, and she related the pathetic scene of the morning. Mhlaba invited her to the ANC meeting the following Sunday. In the meeting people were told about her story. She was asked to join other women and after the meeting she was introduced to Florence Matomela, Talita Chaba, Nomalanga whose surname she could not remember. The four were called by the leaders to go door to door and organise other women in the township. Ma-Baard's concern about the migrants in the hostels became the main problem that the women organised and mobilised around. They went to see the superintendent to find out from him why people had to sleep that way. That was the beginning of Ma-Baard's political career in Port Elizabeth.

Later, Ma-Baard met Ray Alexander, who used to come from Cape Town to organise factory workers. Ma-Baard had moved to work in the food and canning factory. Alexander taught her and other workers trade unionism. From that moment, Ma-Baard and the two Rays (Mhlaba and Alexander) worked closely together. Alexander was always willing to come and address the workers. One day Alexander informed Ma-Baard that she had organised a man to come and talk about the Communist Party. Ma-Baard was invited with other people to a Party meeting in which Mhlaba was present. She heard about the Party's activities and its programme. Thereafter, Ma-Baard went on working together with the ANC, the trade unions, and the Communist Party. She says, "the three organisations became stronger when they were working together, you could not tell which was which, in so much that when I was arrested, I was arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Interview, Frances Baard, 9/1/1991.

Interview, Ray Alexander, 8/3/1991.

Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 16/7/1991.

Schreiner, B., My Spirit is not Banned: Frances Baard as told to Barbie Schreiner, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986, pp. 22-30.

### **Suppression of Communism Act: 1950**

Parliament in 1950 passed a Bill which was aimed at obliterating communism in South Africa. It declared the Communist Party and its allies which promoted communistic activities, unlawful organisations. It prohibited certain periodicals and publications that were thought to promote the same ends, including The Guardian. The penalty for being found still active in the so-called unlawful organisations was five to ten years in jail.<sup>46</sup>

Mhlaba was still the secretary of the local CPSA when the government introduced the Suppression of Communism Act that year. He says that he was present in the last enlarged Central Committee meeting which replaced the annual conference of the CPSA. He remembers that they had long debates and discussions on whether to go underground or not. Finally it was resolved that the CPSA would dissolve. Moses Kotane who was the General Secretary went around the districts informing the membership about the national decision to dissolve. Officially the CPSA no longer existed.<sup>47</sup>

The Act had an immediate impact on communists who were congressites and trade unionists. Mhlaba claims that initially communists could not function normally in the sense that they could not hold or attend meetings. The communists were restricted from being in the company of more than ten people. Communist political work was at a standstill. Police frequented Mhlaba, Tshume and other communists' homes. They searched for literature, and came at awkward times to spy on the communists' activities.

However, "the communists beat the government in this game", declares Mhlaba. "Individuals began to meet later in the very same year of the passing of the obnoxious act. We consulted with each other and eventually decided to form a new party which became the South African Communist Party. The new party was formed in 1953. We met in Johannesburg and declared that the new party was to operate from underground, but

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<sup>46</sup> Daily Dispatch, 7/6/1950.

<sup>47</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

those who were involved in forms of struggle other than being the vanguard of workers' rights were to continue with their political work."<sup>48</sup> The culture of underground work was thus introduced, to which Mhlaba's activities were linked in the period after 1953.

People in Port Elizabeth did not succumb to Malan's tyranny. When Dr Moroka, the ANC national president called for a National Day of Protest against the Suppression of Communism Bill, Port Elizabeth's response to the call was described as being remarkable. Its support was recorded as being the best in the country. The media commented that:

Port Elizabeth was a strange town; It was just like a Sunday; Trains from the locations came in empty, only a handful of black dock workers reported for duty and about three quarters of black railway staff stayed away from work; European volunteers manned the gas works and the canning and sweet factories in particular; Blacks did not report for duty; Black staff at the Provincial Hospital stayed away in force and the only factories not affected were two large motor assembly plants.<sup>49</sup>

Walter Sisulu and Dr Moroka expressed their special gratitude on behalf of the ANC to Port Elizabeth residents and particularly to leaders such as Mhlaba, Njongwe, Desai, Naidoo and others, for their efforts in making the protest a reality.<sup>50</sup>

An informant who has memories of that day stated that although the Bill was finally enacted by the regime, the residents of Port Elizabeth perceived their efforts as a victory because they made their point clear to the government that they were not passive victims of repression. Thereafter, all those who were affected dedicated their political energies to the ANC which was not yet banned.<sup>51</sup> It became easy for CPSA members like Mhlaba in Port Elizabeth to do this, because of their working relationship with other structures in the area.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>49</sup> The Guardian, 22/6/1950

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 22/6/1950.

<sup>51</sup> Interview, Nondwe Mankahla, 29/12/1990.

### The 'coloured' vote, 1951

The Nationalist government threatened to withdraw the 'coloured' vote in 1951. A Coloured Voters Bill was passed which was to be enacted, leading to a loss of political rights for the 'coloureds'. A Franchise Action Committee was consequently elected at a conference in Cape Town, to organise people of the Cape to hold days of protest. The Franchise Action Committee called upon leaders of the ANC, the South African Indian Congress and the African People's Organisation to resist the Bill by organising mass meetings and demonstrations.<sup>52</sup>

Mhlaba played a prominent role in rallying support to defend the 'coloured' vote. He was re-elected as the chairperson of the New Brighton branch at the ANC annual meeting that year. In his address to this meeting he said that their immediate duty was to join forces with other black groups to defend the franchise of the 'coloured' people. He saw the threat by the government as a good opportunity for 'coloureds', Africans, Indians and sympathetic whites to join forces. Mhlaba believed that the 'coloured' people would have a better chance to defend themselves with the help of others. He explained that the 'coloureds' were suffering under the same disabilities as Africans and Indians and that their fight was not directed against the European population but against the government.<sup>53</sup>

Another meeting was held in the Feather Market Hall. It was attended by different organisations who unanimously pledged support for protest against the Coloured Voters Bill. Mhlaba and Njongwe were among the speakers representing the ANC. Mohammed Desai and Dr Dadoo represented the Cape Indian Congress, H. Hiles spoke on behalf of the Coloured People's National Union, and H. Kleinbooie for the African People's Organisation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> The Guardian, 15/2/1951.

<sup>53</sup> The Guardian, 8/3/1951.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>54</sup> The Guardian, 29/3/1951.

The Franchise Action Committee subsequently organised a national political strike against the government to protest against the Coloured Voters Bill. Port Elizabeth was reported to be one of the cities that was organising a solid campaign for the strike. The Port Elizabeth CNETU was alleged to have unanimously agreed to recommend to all members of its affiliated unions to support the strike. Regular lunch-hour meetings were held where the call for the strike was fully endorsed. When the national strike was on, it was reported a success in Port Elizabeth.<sup>55</sup>

Mhlaba states though, that the support given to the 'coloured' people was endorsed after fierce debates within the Port Elizabeth branch of the ANC. There was a division which led some members to resign from the branch. These members were not keen to help the 'coloureds'. Their argument was that the 'coloureds' did nothing to support Africans in 1936, when the Cape African vote was removed from the Common Voters' Roll by Hertzog. They therefore felt strongly that the 'coloureds' did not deserve any sympathy from them.

Mhlaba says that the branch had long been working with 'coloured' and Indian people and these kinds of complaints were never raised. He explains that this was the time when the ANC was preparing for the Defiance Campaign, which was likely to result in people being imprisoned. Mhlaba and his camp saw the 'coloured' vote issue as a scapegoat on the part of the other members who were avoiding the Defiance Campaign consequences.

According to Mhlaba's group, the other members could not imagine themselves locked behind bars because they had witnessed the Passive Resistance of the Indians in 1946. And as was expected, the anti-'coloured' group never took part in the Defiance Campaign in 1952.<sup>56</sup> Mhlaba maintains that the Port Elizabeth ANC branch continued to work and support the 'coloured' communities in their struggles despite this problem.

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<sup>55</sup> The Guardian, 19/4/ & 10/5/1951.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 21/5/1992.

<sup>56</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 21/5/1992.



The protests against the Coloured Vote Bill clearly demonstrated that when the government's segregation policies were further dividing South Africans in order to rule, the Africans, 'coloureds' and Indians in Port Elizabeth stuck together and built mutual trust and confidence among themselves, which was to result in the Congress Alliance.

### **The Defiance Campaign and after**

"The Port Elizabeth branch of the ANC had discussions about the Defiance Campaign. I recall reminding the branch about the coming of van Riebeeck centenary celebrations which were to mark three hundred years of oppression. I told the branch that something had to be done to show that we no longer respected the laws of the colonial state. Tshume thought that I was obsessed with civil disobedience. Mjo, who was an old man at the time persuaded the branch to allow me to present my proposal to the National Conference in Bloemfontein, even if this was not a unanimous decision of the branch", narrates Mhlaba."

"His idea of civil disobedience corresponded with a strike in a King Williams Town textile factory. Tshume, who was organising the workers there, had to leave for Zwelitsha. He stayed in the Milner Hotel while he was consulting with the workers. In the hotel he met some Indians from Johannesburg who coincidentally discussed the very same van Riebeeck centenary celebrations. They were talking about how blacks were to continue living under the white racist rule for so many years. These Indians were also entertaining the idea of doing something about this. This conversation had a profound impact on Tshume for when he came back, he fully supported Mhlaba's original idea of disobedience during the celebrations."

Mhlaba's idea was finally carried to the national conference, with the support of the whole Port Elizabeth branch. When they got there, Mhlaba thought that there was no need to voice it because the national executive had already put it on the agenda. He only supported it from the floor as a delegate. He was pleased to know that it was going to materialise and that they already had a constituency that was backing this idea of civil disobedience back home in Port Elizabeth.<sup>57</sup>

When the Defiance Campaign started, residents of Port Elizabeth supported it with fervour. Volunteers and members were said to have poured into the Congress office and this was history in the making for the ANC. Africans there were known to be the most politically conscious in the country. It was there that the ANC was highly organised. In his acceptance speech when he was re-elected as the chairperson, Mhlaba indicated that membership of the branch had increased remarkably and that the membership had shown a great interest in the advancement of the organisation.<sup>58</sup> As a result Port Elizabeth was seen as the fountainhead of the Defiance Campaign.

Numerous meetings were held at Emlotheni in New Brighton, Melunsky in Korsten, and at the City Hall before and during the Defiance Campaign. Emlotheni and Melunsky were popular venues for ANC open air gatherings. Hundreds of people came to listen to vigorous speeches by local leadership from the ANC, the Women's League, the Youth League and the Cape Indian Congress. It is interesting and appropriate to look at some of these speeches which were recorded by police informers present at those meetings.

Raymond Mhlaba was recorded as saying:

You have attended this meeting today and you are keen to know the date when the laws will be broken; the date will soon be told to you;---the capitalist government only represents the farmers and the mines; most workers are Africans and are oppressed people; there are 250 police at Cape Town and Malan is still nervous;--- at this stage it is necessary for you to be prepared to break and defy unjust laws.<sup>59</sup>

His speech expressed the ideology and class nature of the organisations he belonged to. Mhlaba had been the chairperson of the New Brighton ANC branch since 1947. He had been organising workers in the Laundry Workers Union since 1943. He was the secretary of the CPSA from 1947 until its banning in 1950. His speech was therefore

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<sup>58</sup> The Guardian, 8/3/1951.  
Hirson, B. "The Defiance Campaign 1952: Social Struggle or Party Strategem?" in Searchlight SA, September 1988, no.1

<sup>59</sup> Preparation Examination; Source: GSC; vol.no:1/2/627; Ref: 79/1953; p. 72 (and 64 for 'underdogs').

effectively appealing to people who were experiencing discrimination and exploitation, hence the persuasive language such as the 'workers as the oppressed, and the government as 'capitalist'. In another speech he made in Korsten, Mhlaba also referred to the people as the 'underdogs' whose actions would be watched by the whole world on June 6. June 6 was the day the Defiance Campaign was to begin and Mhlaba led the first batch of defiers in Port Elizabeth.

Dr. Veerapatheran Kishnasamy Moodley was alleged to have said the following in a meeting held in the City Hall:

We are meeting at a very historic period in the history of our country: a passive resistance campaign has been launched by the African and Indian people, in order to do battle against unjust laws; the ANC is leading the battle for democracy; the writing is on the wall to those who oppress us; those who chose fascism will perish; the Non-European will not tolerate injustice but will rise en masse and put down those suppressing us.<sup>60</sup>

The co-operation between the Cape Indian Congress and the PE ANC showed that the Indian community was not indifferent to black resistance against segregation. Evident in Moodley's speech was a joint commitment by Indians and Africans to fight fascism and oppression. The Indians worked side by side with Africans in acts of defying unjust laws in Port Elizabeth.

Florence Matomela, considered one of the most effective and militant speakers by her fellow comrades, was alleged to have said the following in a meeting held at Emlotheni:

Malan is a boer and the son of a thief; we were born in South Africa and we will die in South Africa; we don't demand much but we would also like the privileges that Malan, Donges and Swart and their wives have: Malan has applied apartheid in the New Brighton railway station; we are going to break those laws, in spite of machine guns and bombs; we will not respect Malan and his unjust laws; Swart says he is the master of Justice, but I say he is the master of unjust laws; every white man is a Satan and you must treat him as such; if you have never seen Satan in hell, look at the white man, then you can say that you have seen Satan.

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<sup>60</sup> Preparation Examination, Source:GSC; vol.no. 1/2/1/627; Ref:79/53; p.64.

She then appealed to the women and the volunteers to join the ANC.<sup>61</sup> Matomela at the time was the president of the ANCWL in the Eastern Cape. She was amongst the first batch of defiers in Port Elizabeth and was given an additional fine because she took part in a meeting without permission.<sup>62</sup> Although her speech was vociferous and rhetorical, it also showed an anti-white attitude which generated fears among some communists, that extreme nationalist sentiments were spreading within the ANC, at the expense of class interests.<sup>63</sup>

Many of the defiance leaders including the three mentioned were arrested for contravening the Suppression of Communism Act or for inciting public violence. As a gesture of retaliation for the arrest of their leaders, the Defiance movement on the ground immediately sent volunteers into action to defy apartheid laws at Port Elizabeth railway stations. The first batch of twenty one women led by Nompoti Njongwe was arrested at the New Brighton railway station.<sup>64</sup> Since the 1950 anti-pass campaign, women displayed aggressive militancy in the resistance movement.

Reverend A.A. Tsekeletsa, who was the Secretary of the Port Elizabeth African Ministers' Council and the Cape Midlands Non-Denominational Association also made a statement that as from that day, the African churches in the Eastern Cape were to take a stand in support of the resistance movement. A mass prayer meeting was held at the Wellington Memorial Church in New Brighton.<sup>65</sup> In his comparative study between the Transvaal and the Eastern Cape on the 1952 Defiance Campaign, Carter also avers the

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<sup>61</sup> Statement of Sogoni and Nel: Source:GSC; vol.no. 1/2/1/627; Ref: 79/53 p.8.

<sup>62</sup> Daily Dispatch, 12/7/1952;  
Evening Post, 10/7/1952.

<sup>63</sup> Everatt, "Alliance Politics of a Special Type", p.20.

<sup>64</sup> Evening Post, 11/9/1952.  
Interview, Nompoti Njongwe, 26/3/1991.

<sup>65</sup> Evening Post, 12/9/1952.

church support to the Campaign in Port Elizabeth.<sup>66</sup> Thereafter more than three hundred and fifty defiers were reported to have been arrested. This was said to be the biggest scale of demonstration in the country.<sup>67</sup>

The Port Elizabeth Indian section also participated in the Defiance Campaign. One Indian was arrested with seven Africans under the Suppression of Communism Act during the period of retaliation by the defiers. Dr Moodley assisted the defiers with fundraising among his fellow Asian traders.<sup>68</sup> Earlier, the Port Elizabeth Cape Indian Congress had passed a resolution condemning the decision of the Native Affairs Committee of the city council to bar non-Africans from the New Brighton ANC public meetings.<sup>69</sup> When the Nationalist government banned The Guardian, the 'voice of the oppressed', the Port Elizabeth District Indian Youth Congress also recorded its protest.<sup>70</sup>

There is evidence that some 'coloureds' who were staying in Veeplaas remained within the ANC instead of joining the Coloured People's Congress (CPC). In that case it can be assumed that some of those and the few who were active in the CPC participated in the Defiance Campaign.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Carter, "The Defiance Campaign", p.83.

<sup>67</sup> Evening Post, 12/9/1952.

<sup>68</sup> Carter, "The Defiance Campaign", p.81. This is corroborated by Mhlaba and Mr Pillay. (the senior)

<sup>69</sup> Evening Post, 30/5/1952.

<sup>70</sup> Clarion, 5/6/1952.

<sup>71</sup> Cherry, Blot on the Landscape, pp.78-85.

Riots broke out in New Brighton in October and the ANC disclaimed responsibility. The Port Elizabeth city council consequently imposed a curfew and a ban on all public meetings for three months except religious meetings. The ANC wasted no time calling for an emergency regional conference, to call a general strike and to protest against the denial of their long-standing rights to hold public meetings. The conference was reported to have been attended by sixty delegates from fifteen branches representing 30682 members. The strike call was thereafter endorsed at mass meetings at Emlotheni in New Brighton, Melunsky in Korsten, in Veeplaas and at Walmer.<sup>72</sup>

The strike resolution declared:

There is no state of emergency in the Port Elizabeth area, but the authorities are suffering from a guilty conscience because of their policies of race discrimination which have discredited South Africa in the eyes of the world. The government, subservient to the mining interests and the rich farmers, is trying to frighten the white electorate with stories about the non-existent 'black menace', communism and more planned riots in the Eastern Cape, so that they could be allowed to proceed with their plans of converting South Africa into a fully fledged fascist state.<sup>73</sup>

The resolution also outlined that each home was to conduct a prayer and a fast. Each member of the family including children, was to stay at home the first day. On the second day, children were to be allowed to go to school whilst the adults continued to stay at home, "until God Almighty changed the hearts of the city councillors"; and made them lift the ban and the curfew. Also, every night, all churches were to hold night services for the residents of Port Elizabeth.

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<sup>72</sup> Advance, 6/11/1952.

<sup>73</sup> Advance, 6/11/1952.

The resolution further stated that the conference had no alternative but to defend the Defiance Campaign with all the machinery at its disposal, because the Defiance Campaign embodied the hopes of all oppressed and frustrated blacks and white progressives. The strike therefore was to continue indefinitely until the demands of the ANC were met.<sup>74</sup>

Mhlaba, who was still chairperson of the ANC, warned that if the city council failed to withdraw the curfew and lift the ban on meetings, the strike was to be fully effective throughout the Eastern Province.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, the cabinet ministers addressing the Nationalist Party audiences in their meetings and rallies, threatened to banish what they described as trouble makers. H.F. Verwoerd, the Minister of Native Affairs, threatened to banish 'agitators' from 'troubled spots' such as Port Elizabeth. He also warned the African preachers and churches to confine themselves to their religious duties if they wished to continue enjoying the benefits and privileges derived from their exemption from the Riotous Assemblies Act. J.G. Strydom, the prime minister, asserted that the government was reaching a stage of exhaustion and would therefore act as firmly as the British government was then doing in Kenya against the Mau-Mau. V. Swart, the minister of justice, promised to authorise drastic action against the 'trouble makers', saying that the police would shoot, and those who created disturbances were to expect severe treatment.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Advance, 6/11/1952.

<sup>75</sup> Daily Dispatch, 8/11/1952.  
Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 28/12/1992.

<sup>76</sup> Daily Dispatch, 3/11 & 8/11/1952.

The situation became more and more volatile in Port Elizabeth. However, through negotiations within the ANC and between the ANC leadership and the city council, the period of operation of the curfew was reduced, and the indefinite period of the strike reduced to a One-Day Stay-at-home.<sup>77</sup>

The One-Day strike was reported to have been successful. Africans were said to have stayed at home quietly and spent the day fasting and praying. Police estimated a maximum of 10% of Africans who went to work but the bulk of those were probably domestic workers who slept on the property of their employers. Many industries were affected and the consumption of electric power was 20% below normal. The majority of Indian shops also closed in response to a call by the Indian Congress. Even the police chief major Fourie was said to have admitted at a press conference that the strike had been a success. Some of the participants also confirmed having stayed at home in the dark, fasting and praying.<sup>78</sup>

The Stay-At-Home undoubtedly displayed the meshing of working class politics and political demands. It showed the close working relationship between the ANC, the trade unions and the Communist Party as indicated by the mass support from workers in many industries that were affected. It also showed racial cooperation which helped to build more militancy in Port Elizabeth. Mhlaba certainly played a prominent role in all of these.

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<sup>77</sup> Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa, p.54. This is where Lodge refers to a tension between Njongwe and the local brand of leadership over the duration of this strike. His version of the negotiations between the ANC leadership and Njongwe's role differs from that presented in the Advance 13/11/1952.

<sup>78</sup> Advance, 13/11/1952  
Eastern Province Herald, 11/11/1952  
Evening Post, 10/11/1952  
 Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 28/12/1992  
 Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 19/7/1991  
 Interview, Nondwe Mankahla, 29/12/1990  
 Interview, Nontuthuzelo Mabhala, 29/12/1990  
 Interview, Nontsomi Magwaza, 29/12/1990.



## Conclusion

The distinctively working class leadership of people like Mhlaba represented an exceptionally unique characteristic of black opposition in Port Elizabeth. This is evident from the existence of the 'red' Youth League in PE, whilst elsewhere, the forces opposed to apartheid were dominated by a generation of militant African nationalists.

In Port Elizabeth, the period 1947 to 1952 reveals a heightened alliance between the labour and political movements as shown in Ma-Baard and Fazzie's experiences, as well as others who were interviewed. Non-racialism was also important and evident in the Port Elizabeth ANC leadership as indicated by the constituency of the protesters against the 'coloured' vote in 1951. However the 'coloured', Indian and white activists were mainly involved with trade union and CPSA work. There was little organisation of their communities in Port Elizabeth.

"The Cape Indian Congress for instance was not working class in character. Many of its members in Port Elizabeth were business people. Yet individuals from the leadership level occasionally attended ANC meetings in New Brighton and during the Defiance Campaign for example, they offered financial support rather than going to gaol", explained Mhlaba.

As with the Indians, 'coloureds' and whites also gave individual support to the cause of the struggle. Yet, New Brighton had a strong African and non-racial leadership, and no particular group dominated over the other. The New Brighton leadership did not have a strong Africanist position.

It was this non-racial, working class quality which distinguished Mhlaba's Port Elizabeth leadership and this was to be the salient feature of the Congress Alliance which was eventually formally established in 1956.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **BEHIND THE CURTAIN: 1954-1963**

#### **Mhlaba, the indomitable**

The government never stopped using its arsenal of powers to cripple black resistance. This became more pronounced after the Defiance Campaign, particularly in Port Elizabeth where resistance had been successful. Comparing the Eastern Cape and the Transvaal, Carter records that at the beginning of the Campaign, there was no influx control imposed Africans in Port Elizabeth. There were no curfew regulations and there were less restrictions on black political activities in Port Elizabeth than in the Transvaal.<sup>1</sup>

For a long time, local authority in the hands of the city council in Port Elizabeth, had been liberal towards the African population. In the year of the Defiance Campaign, even the city council could no longer bypass the gamut of the racist Nationalist Party as signified by the imposition of a ban on public meetings, the curfew and especially the imposition of pass laws and influx control.

The Port Elizabeth branch of the ANC condemned the city council for suppressing its organisation and the trade unions by 'allowing itself to be led (by the Nationalist government) on the road to fascism.'<sup>2</sup> Advance, a successor to The Guardian, also criticised the city council for succumbing to the pressure of Verwoerd and Swart, who were bent on imposing the most stringent measures in Port Elizabeth. Advance accused the city council of capitulating to the Nationalist government.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, "The Defiance Campaign", p.77.

<sup>2</sup> Advance, 13/11/1952.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

On its side, the government proceeded to immobilise left wing opposition. Mass meetings were prohibited, individuals restricted through surveillance, harassment, banning, banishment and imprisonment. The government passed the Criminal Amendment Act in 1953 which meant that any person who committed an offence by way of protest or support of any campaign against any law could be sentenced to a whipping of ten strokes, or a #300 fine, or three years imprisonment, or a combination of any two of these penalties. For someone whose words or actions were calculated to cause another person to commit an offence by way of protest, the above maximum penalties were increased by an additional #200 fine or two years imprisonment.<sup>4</sup>

On top of this, the Public Safety Act of 1953, which provided for the suspension of all laws in periods of emergency, was also passed. This law empowered the cabinet to declare a state of emergency if it thought public order was seriously threatened. During the state of emergency people could be arrested and detained, without trial.<sup>5</sup> The ANC was thus put on the defensive.

If the conditions of resistance in the 1940s could be regarded as having been liberal and more accommodating, then the period of the 1950s was more repressive. Such conditions pointed to a need for clandestine political resistance. All formations which fought against oppression and racial domination were to be affected in different ways, and their leaders' activities restricted in the most severe manner.

Mhlaba was amongst those who received banning orders from Swart, the Minister of Justice in 1953. He was served with a notice ordering his immediate resignation from the ANC. He was prohibited from attending any gathering. He had to report to the New Brighton police station every Monday at nine in the morning. This meant that he could not attend meetings any more, nor could he be found in any social

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<sup>4</sup> Karis, & Gerhart, From Protest To Challenge, vol.3. p.4,6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.6.

gathering. In addition his movements were closely watched.<sup>6</sup>

Mhlaba took his banning order to the ANC executive, which refused to accept it. He and the branch executive took the decision that he was to defy the order and continue with his political work, but to do so under cover. Although he stopped attending meetings, the branch secretary kept him up to date with the reports of the organisation. Individual members from the branch consulted with him regularly, seeking either his opinion or endorsement in the activities of the organisation as well as his views on general developments in the area.

The ANC was engaged in conducting classes on political education. Mhlaba claims that he continued with his study group, but with fewer people than before. There used to be a class of about ten people but because of his predicament he could only meet with one person at a time, who might, with insight gained from the encounter with Mhlaba, in turn take over the study group. Mhlaba comments that although it seemed strange at the beginning to conduct his political work in this fashion, he adjusted quickly because he had already begun operating underground as a communist in the SACP.<sup>7</sup>

Restrictions were not limited to individuals such as Mhlaba in Port Elizabeth. There was a national clampdown. Nelson Mandela, the National Volunteer-in-Chief during the Defiance Campaign, anticipated that the government would attempt to stop the ANC from organising mass actions, holding public meetings and issuing press statements. As a result he proposed that the branches should be divided into cells based on a single street and headed by a cell steward. This network was to move from a cell (street) into a zone, into a ward and into a branch secretariat. A zone consisted of seven streets and these were co-ordinated by a chief steward. Each street had its steward which reported to the chief steward. The chief stewards of each zone united with four others to form a ward and one of them was elected as a prime steward. The prime stewards in turn formed a branch secretariat to administer the

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/3/1993.  
Advance, 26/11/1953

ANC within the townships.<sup>8</sup>

In Port Elizabeth, the M-Plan, as the proposal by Mandela was known, was already implemented by 1953. New Brighton had about twenty one zones. Mhlaba was involved in the zoning of New Brighton. Boastville (currently known as Mhlabaville) was one of the zones and consisted of the following streets: Masumpa, Singapi, Ferguson A, Avenue A, Sandla, Mtiya and Ximiya. Mhlaba's house was in Masumpa. Each street had its own steward whose task was to recruit within the street. The steward had to inform on the types of people in each street, whether there were for example policemen. The most important task for the steward was to know everything happening within the street, be it a social event like a funeral, an initiation ceremony or even a fight.

These duties were crucial because when it came to organising meetings, the ANC could not risk holding a meeting of more than ten people in one street knowing that there were police in the neighbourhood. Social functions like African traditional ceremonies (initiation) or funerals for instance, were used by the ANC to advance its political goals. The street steward therefore had to be always on the alert in order to organise properly and thereby utilise such occasions effectively.<sup>9</sup>

Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, who was in the branch secretariat of New Brighton in 1953, states that directives from the Congress whether locally or nationally were passed easily and more quickly. He would meet with the chief stewards and give information about certain events. The chief stewards would take the message to all zones. They in turn would pass it to the street stewards who would communicate it to the people

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<sup>8</sup> Interview, Govan Mbeki, 23/12/1990  
 Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 16/7/1991  
 Interview, Nondwe Mankahla, 26/12/1990  
 Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa, p.75.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/1/1993  
 Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 16/7/1991  
 Interview, Govan Mbeki, 23/12/1990.

either verbally or in writing.<sup>10</sup>

Nondwe Mankahla remembers that when the message or directive was confidential, the chief steward would personally come to convey it verbally to the people. When it was public the street stewards with the help of the volunteers distributed leaflets or pamphlets. The latter were the common forms of communication in those days.<sup>11</sup>

Magqabi attributes the efficiency of the M-plan in Port Elizabeth to the discipline exercised within the structures and the trust that members shared. He maintains that at no stage did he doubt that the instructions he gave to the chief stewards would be carried out. He claims that this confidence was derived from the fact that 'the ANC was secured in Port Elizabeth'. He asserts that he worked with 'committed people who had courage and determination to carry on with the struggle'. According to Magqabi, 'these were politically mature people'.

The street stewards were always aware of developments in their vicinity. When there was need for the chief steward to intervene in a situation, he did so without hesitation. Through this kind of political organisation, activists became skilled in many ways. They learnt their rights when they were arrested; how to go about seeking legal advice; how to get medical assistance during emergency cases; and how to draw up leaflets and so on.<sup>12</sup>

Street stewards were helped by volunteers in recruiting from door to door for the ANC. Only one person in the family signed if the family was interested. That was usually the father and the children would automatically join the Youth League or the volunteers. Some of the volunteers claim that they were successful in recruiting families to join the ANC. They also acknowledge nonetheless that there were some households who refused to join. 'They would not hear a thing about the Congress'. This was common amongst the highly 'educated', the 'professionals'. The latter

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 16/7/1991.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Nondwe Mankahla, 26/12/1990.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 16/7/1991.

claimed that the ANC was an organisation of illiterates and that the volunteers did not know what they were doing except sending people to jail. When arrests were made, these were the people who would feel vindicated. This showed the working class nature of the ANC in Port Elizabeth and suspicions about an incipient middle class.

A handful of members from both the nursing and teaching professions, headmen and others working for the government were however, receptive. They would tell the volunteers that they supported the ANC but were not able to join it for fear of losing their jobs. Policemen were left alone, as volunteers were keen to avoid confrontation.<sup>13</sup>

In anticipation of a state clampdown, the organisation prepared an infrastructure in order to ensure that those who were affected by the ban were not entirely excluded from its activities. At the same time such an infrastructure also ensured its organisational capacity and improved its contact with ordinary supporters.

"I was also under the jurisdiction of my own street steward. Like other people in Masumpa, where I stayed, I received information on what was happening from the street steward. I was also allocated tasks, such as going door to door, passing messages and helping with the drafting of leaflets, to name just a few. Although I was banned, I could still carry out a number of tasks. For me, this was a matter of having a little chat with a neighbour. I did not see any breaching of law in that."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, Nondwe Mankahla, 26/12/1990.  
Interview, Nontuthuzelo Mabhala, 26/12/1990  
Interview, Nontsomi Mazangwa, 26/12/1990.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/1/1993.

## Outrage Against Restrictions

People in Port Elizabeth did not take kindly to the restrictions imposed on their leaders. They became angrier and more aggressive towards the government. Acts of protest and demonstrations took place through mass involvement in an endeavour to pledge solidarity with those affected.<sup>15</sup>

A new organisation called '**Let the People Speak**' was formed in 1954. Its committee organised an open air meeting for residents in New Brighton. Raymond Mhlaba, Gladstone Tshume, A.P. Mati and H. Manuel, all of who had banning orders served on them, were invited to come and speak in this meeting. Manuel was a 'coloured' gentleman from Schauder. He was responsible for organising the railway workers and was active in the Coloured People's Organisation before he was banned.

Over two hundred people were reported to have attended the meeting. The police were also present but this did not dampen the enthusiastic reception with which the speakers were met.<sup>16</sup> The idea behind this meeting was to challenge the government at its own game. According to people in Port Elizabeth, the new organisation was certainly not in the list of organisations banned by the government. Hence Mhlaba, Tshume, Manuel could come and speak.<sup>17</sup>

The textile unions in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage sent an open letter to C. Swart, the Minister of Justice, who was responsible for the banning of Gladstone Tshume, Mhlaba and Manuel. Tshume had been an organiser for the African Textile Workers Union. It is necessary to read the content of the letter because it shows clearly the meshed worker and political demands in the minds of the people of Port Elizabeth. The letter

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 16/7/1990.

<sup>16</sup> Advance, 4/3/1954

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/1/1993.



read as follows:

We are convinced that Mr G.X. Tshume, our ex-secretary, who is ordered to resign his position as secretary for African Textile Workers' Union by you, is a freedom-loving South African and he is the type of a man that the working class liberatory movement needs. We therefore remind you that Hitler of Germany tried to destroy working class movements in other freedom-loving countries, but the workers stopped him and he afterwards perished. The above mentioned workers' union calls upon you to lift the order against the people's leader. We demand the return of our secretary to continue with his work. We want you to realise the fact that there is no government which can succeed to pursue its policy without the co-operation of the majority of the population of the country and we warn you that your boat is sinking.<sup>18</sup>

Gus Coe was also banned along with Mhlaba, Tshume and Manuel. She was white, a staunch trade unionist and a communist. She was the secretary of the PE branch of the Food and Canning Workers Union. She wrote a public letter declaring that the canning workers would not be terrorised by Swart. She wanted to let all the workers with whom she had been associated in the ten years know that she was proud to be numbered among those people who were fighting against the apartheid policy of the government. She wrote that Swart was merely exposing the barren and negative policy of his government by using that fascist measure and the Suppression of Communism Act to remove her from the position to which she had been properly elected by the members of the union. She believed that the government was attacking the very people who were concerned about the problems of the people, in an attempt to draw the people's attention away from their justifiable grievances and complaints. She asserted that whatever hindrances and obstacles the government placed in the way of the people's forward movement, they would be brushed aside. She maintained that the workers would continue to fight for equal, economic, social and political rights for all.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Advance, 21/1/1954.

<sup>19</sup> Advance, 2/9/1954.

The fact that the individuals affected by the banning orders were neither exclusively Africans or ANC members, contributed to the development of a common front against such measures. Through this opposition, the gains of the 1940s, in sowing the seeds of an alliance were enhanced by the need for a common opposition to the new apartheid regime. State action bestowed heroism on the victims of the banning orders and thereby ensured that victims such as Mhlaba enjoyed recognition and popularity in the community that would always ensure that they were consulted on important developments in the region.

### **The Struggle Continues**

If they were denied full participation in executive and other platforms of their organisations by restriction orders served on them, Mhlaba and Tshume could still wield their pens. Advance published their articles. Mhlaba wrote a letter of support for the candidature of Ray Alexander during Parliamentary and Provincial elections. He had known Alexander from the trade union movement and the Communist Party. He was therefore supporting her for the principles she stood for, on the basis of full equal rights for all citizens of South Africa. He encouraged Africans of the Western Cape to demonstrate their political consciousness and to use correctly the meagre political rights at their disposal by electing a representative of the 'people'.<sup>20</sup>

Glad Tshume also congratulated the African people of the Western Cape for electing Sam Kahn, Brian Bunting and Fred Carneson to Parliament in the Provincial Council. He wrote that the three were the people who had fought with them in their daily struggles against oppression. He and Jacob Machaka also supported the election of Ray Alexander. Machaka wrote that Africans should send 'their bomb', Ray Alexander, to Parliament, 'so that she could be there with her right thumb for Africa'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Advance, 25/3/1954.

<sup>21</sup> Advance, 8/4/1954.

The New Brighton ANC branch conveyed its fraternal greetings to the workers of South Africa, to the workers of the colonial countries and those of the world. The message stated that the flagrant fascist practices of the government were to be challenged by the South African workers. Branches of different unions in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage also appealed to all workers in South Africa to make it a point that on May Day, 1954 the workers' struggle for a united, free and democratic trade union movement intensified. They also appealed to everyone to join with all freedom-loving people to fight against the vicious amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Bill.<sup>22</sup> This displayed not only the influence of the banned working class leadership on the active ANC leadership, but also the continuing close relationship between the workers' unions and the political organisations.

The New Brighton and Korsten ANC branches sanctioned an 'economic' boycott of Jewish shops and butcheries which were alleged to be selling stale meat to Africans and ill-treating African customers. The shops were owned by Perelson Bros. (Pty), Ltd. Residents in Port Elizabeth complained about this and women stood up and demanded that the owners should improve the quality of their services. Residents also demanded that the owners should employ African people on the grounds that they were the ones who supported them mostly. The Perelson Bros staff was mainly 'coloured' and white. This was the period when some of the defiers lost their jobs because of the days and months spent in jail during the Defiance Campaign.

The owners initially ignored these demands. They argued that they needed approval from England to do so. A boycott of these shops and butcheries was therefore called. A press coverage described how the boycott went ahead. The Jewish shops and butcheries were brought to a standstill. Shop assistants were seen behind the counters with no customers to serve. The police force used to idle around the shops purporting to be protecting those who wanted to buy. Some of the passers-by were reported to have told the police that they did not need their protection. The boycott lasted for three days, (others say it lasted for four) and no arrests were made.

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<sup>22</sup> Advance 29/4/1954.

The Perelson Bros. finally called a meeting with the ANC leadership because their business was suffering. They agreed to employ African block men and they trained Africans as salesmen in their butcheries as well as in New Brighton drapery stores. Block men were those responsible for cutting meat with machines. Thereafter leaflets were distributed by the ANC calling off the boycott, informing African residents that they could support those shops.<sup>23</sup>

The use of an economic boycott by the ANC reflected an affinity between political and industrial concerns. This, as has been amply documented throughout this study, consolidated a tradition which was initiated and maintained by people such as Mhlaba in Port Elizabeth.

### **The Congress of the People**

One informant remembered Professor Matthews and Walter Sisulu coming to Port Elizabeth to inform people about the Congress of the People. Professor Matthews was the Cape Provincial President of the ANC. He proposed that people of South Africa, from all walks of life, - the rich, the poor, the educated, christians, sportsmen, workers, the youth - had to say and write for themselves what they wanted or wished for, from a democratic government. These wants and wishes were to be put in a document which was to be known as the Freedom Charter. He explained how people had to go about drawing up the Freedom Charter.

Walter Sisulu also told them about the decision taken by the ANC, the SAIC, the Congress Of Democrats (COD) and the South African Coloured People Congress

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, Henry Fazzie, 18/7/1991  
 Interview, Mthuthuzeli Magqabi, 16/7/1991  
 Interview, Hilda Tshaka, 20/5/1992  
 Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/1/1993  
Advance, 14/2/1954.

(SACPC), to go ahead with the idea of the Freedom Charter.<sup>24</sup>

Through the M-Plan, it became easy to spread the message about the Freedom Charter in Port Elizabeth. The street stewards together with volunteers and other ANC members allocated tasks amongst themselves. Some went door to door to ask for individual wishes and demands. Others still went to churches to speak with those who were not in the Congress. Others went to sports' clubs to explain the purpose of the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter to those who were more interested in sport than politics. Some of the demands were about the repeal of the Pass laws which was a real grievance at the time, others concerned housing, transport, trade unions and so on.<sup>25</sup>

Mhlaba's participation was limited to collecting from a few of his immediate neighbours their ideas about the sort of South Africa they wanted. He was not able to go to Kliptown because he was still under a banning order. He says that when the Port Elizabeth delegates came back from Kliptown, those who could not be there were happy with the outcome of the Freedom Charter.<sup>26</sup>

It is unfortunate that he could not be more actively involved by being present to witness the adoption of the Freedom Charter, for he had all along been struggling with Africans, Indians, whites and 'coloureds' for a united, non racial democratic country, free from racial oppression and exploitation. The establishment of the Congress Alliance which embraced the ANC, the SAIC, the COD and the SACPC, and produced the Freedom Charter, was therefore a high point in Mhlaba's political career. It was certainly the culmination of many years of nurturing an alliance against apartheid and a vindication of the course taken by the various formations in Port Elizabeth.

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, Henry Fazzie, 18/7/1991.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Henry Fazzie, 18/7/1991.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/1/1993.  
Interviews with Govan Mbeki & Raymond Mhlaba, "Monitor", Human Rights Journal, 1989, December, p.25.

## The Communist Party underground

Despite his absence from Kliptown, Mhlaba was very much present and alive behind closed doors in Port Elizabeth. At this time the SACP which was already operating underground had its own people that were working within the structures of the M-Plan. Mhlaba tells that:

"Almost each cell in Port Elizabeth had Communist Party members. Party structures were set up and we conducted political education classes once a week. I was myself a member of the Central Committee. My duties were to feed our structures with the necessary information and later I organised the distribution of the Communist Party publications - pamphlets - the African Communist. I attended the national congresses which were held once a year in different secret venues."<sup>27</sup>

In 1954, the New Brighton ANC branch adopted a resolution which called for the opening of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in the interest of peace and prosperity, testifies to the close working relationship between the ANC and the SACP. The New Brighton branch also sent greetings of peace and friendship to the people of the Soviet Union through Reverend D.C. Thompson who was at that time in Port Elizabeth.<sup>28</sup>

When the government banned Advance, Port Elizabeth residents protested vehemently. They criticised the government for its intention to ban all the people of South Africa from speaking freely. They, as the working class of South Africa, called upon all the peace-loving citizens to halt the injustices by the government and restore the freedom of the Press.<sup>29</sup> Mhlaba explains that Advance was produced by communists and it was regarded as a newspaper of the people. This was the only newspaper that gave facts and

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 4/1/1993.

<sup>28</sup> New Age, 18/11/1954.

<sup>29</sup> New Age, November 4, 1954.

information about the lives of the people that one could not read about from other newspapers such as the Evening Post or Eastern Province Herald.

This was however not a uniform view about the Advance in Port Elizabeth. Some circles of activists did not support the Newspaper. One informant specifically mentioned that he did not like Govan Mbeki who was running the Newspaper office in Port Elizabeth. The informant believed that the communists, including Mbeki, were misleading the African people with their theories of multi-racialism. The informant was among the people who later formed the Pan Africanist Congress branch in 1959, in Port Elizabeth.

### **SACTU in Port Elizabeth**

The formation of SACTU solidified the close working relationship between labour and political movements in Port Elizabeth. As early as the period just before and after the Defiance Campaign, many people who were active in the struggles being waged in Port Elizabeth expressed the feeling that there were moments when they felt that the ANC was an organisation for the workers and that trade unions were there to also support their political concerns. It has already been established that this is ascribed to the leadership of people such as Mhlaba who had an overlapping membership, and a commitment to integrate worker and political demands of the working class people.

Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall point out that SACTU activities in Port Elizabeth were always distinguished by the disciplined and militant trade unionism and close relationship with the ANC and the Coloured People's Congress. They attribute this to veteran trade unionists and political leaders such as Mhlaba, Tshume, Ntunja, Mati, Coe and others who fed the younger activists with political education.<sup>30</sup>

Mhlaba recalls that he would ask his cousin to organise 'igogogo', a traditional ceremony

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<sup>30</sup> Luckhardt, K. & Wall, B., Organize or Starve! The History of The South African Congress of Trade Unions, pp.227-228.

where traditional beer would be brewed and people would be invited to the occasion. His cousin would slaughter an animal to attract more people as African people have a reputation of being fond of meat. People would then come, and Mhlaba, as a relative, would be given the platform to speak, as this was practice in African traditional ceremonies. Instead of talking about the ancestors, which topic would constitute only a very brief introduction, Mhlaba would talk about trade unionism and why and how it was important that the workers organise themselves. Glad Tshume and others would also attend and were given an opportunity to speak. This was one way in which Mhlaba continued with his political work after his ban, which was renewed occasionally.<sup>31</sup>

### **Ups and Downs!**

The gains that were made through the formation of SACTU, the drawing up of the Freedom Charter and a campaign against the Bantu Education Act in 1955, in terms of mobilising people, were most often met with more repression by the government. The police conducted raids in an effort to uncover evidence of subversion. They raided and arrested one hundred and fifty six people on a charge of Treason. Some of these men and women were members of the Congress Alliance.

Mhlaba was not one of them. He had miraculously managed to evade arrest, yet it was clear from the manner in which he now conducted himself that the strain and frustration of harassment by the government had taken its toll. He began drinking excessively thus compromising his political work. Govan Mbeki was already in Port Elizabeth at the time. Mbeki was a national figure in the ANC and was the local editor of the New Age, and also responsible for the Port Elizabeth office. He had been drawn into the local structures and he worked jointly with the local leadership and membership. At the outset, he was determined not to allow Mhlaba give in to drink. He went to fetch him from the shebeens and persuaded him to come along with him in order to fulfil his

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<sup>31</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/7/1992.



political duties. Since then, they have been working together as close friends.<sup>32</sup>

Mhlaba recovered from his drinking bout and resumed his political activism. This was evident in the letter he wrote, sending a message of support to all workers on May Day 1957. His letter read as follows:

As we commemorate the victory of the workers in the last century whose struggles gave us the hope that we would pass from the night of capitalist exploitation to the dawn of a worker's trade union democracy, let us throw our whole weight behind SACTU in its programme to fight anti-labour laws of the Nats Government and to usher a new South Africa based on the Freedom Charter.<sup>33</sup>

From then onwards Mhlaba was not to turn back. He resumed his work in the labour and political movement. He recalls that from 1958, it dawned on the liberation movements that the government was really determined to crush their organisations. Debates about the possibility of armed struggle ensued within the SACP. These debates coincided with other problems such as the split between the ANC and the PAC.

He states that he was not surprised with the Pan Africanist break away in 1959. He viewed this as 'a tendency amongst some black people to be taken up by nationalism to an extent of being anti-white. Those people needed a strong political background in order to make them appreciate and understand the concept of non-racialism'.

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, Govan Mbeki, 23/12/1990.

<sup>33</sup> New Age, 2/5/1957.

Nonetheless ANC and the PAC were both banned in 1960. In the same year, the first State of Emergency in the country was declared. Mhlaba states that these events came as no shock to the liberation movements. By then talks of armed struggle were intensifying within the SACP.

It is important to note that Mhlaba had to consult with the National Executive members of both the SACP and the ANC before he could give any information about his experiences in the armed struggle at the time. This is because the armed struggle is among the 'thorny' issues in the current era of negotiations between the liberation movements and the government.<sup>34</sup>

The same sentiment about the armed struggle was expressed by the PAC interviewees in Port Elizabeth. They made it clear that their organisation is still fighting for the liberation of African people. For that reason, they do not want to let the enemy know their strategies of fighting. As far as they are concerned, 'the war is still on, African people are still oppressed in their own soil'.<sup>35</sup>

What follows is the only information that Mhlaba could reveal about his experiences in the armed struggle. He narrates that:

"We, as Party members had discussions about how they were to constitute an armed struggle. With this a whole lot of other questions presented themselves: how would they get soldiers; where would the soldiers get their military training; how were they to organise assistance from outside governments? how were they to get weapons and explosives, and many other such questions". The Central Committee eventually made a decision that I had to leave for China in October, 1961. I was told today and the next day, I took a train to Johannesburg without a word to my family. My first wife had died by then and my children were looked after by one of my sisters who was staying with us. The lawyers I was working for were probably surprised that I did not show up the next days which turned into weeks and months, without a word from me."

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, Mzimkhulu Gqobose, 19/7/1991.  
Interview, Norman Tsotsobe, 19/7/1991.

"Rusty Bernstein, a colleague in the Party, came to fetch me from the Park Station to the Rivonia farm. In the farm I met Nelson Mandela and was later joined by Andrew Mlangeni. We spent the weekend there and the following Monday, John Nkadimeng was assigned the task of taking myself and Mlangeni out of the country. He drove us to Lobatse. From there we had to hire a private plane to Tanzania, from there to Ghana, to Soviet Union and finally, to China"

"The journey was not smooth as it may sound. We had to fight with some of the securities of in the different countries. I'm telling you, we had to use African nationalism with some of those African chaps in some cases. Some of them were working with the South African government and they would want to send us back. Sometimes we had to use diplomacy with white chaps too. We would push patriotism and persuade them to understand why we needed to do what we were intending to do. In any event, we arrived in China and we met other South Africans on the way. There was a Steven Naidoo, an Indian gentleman from London who originally came from Natal and was a law student. We also met Wilton Mkwazi, Nqabeni Mthembu"

"We all received a basic course in guerilla warfare. We learnt how to manufacture indigenous weapons. We spent about ten months in Northern China and for the remaining two months we toured the South. We also met with Chinese women who had their own army and we learnt a few skills from these women. Our group spent almost a year before we came back to South Africa".<sup>36</sup>

During the same period, there were units who were involved in a sabotage campaign. More bomb blasts by MK were reported, especially in Port Elizabeth. A bomb was planted at the electrical sub-station near New Brighton. It wrecked the heavy double door, smashing the hardboard ceiling and asbestos roof and damaging the top section of the walls. The damage was estimated at about R3000. Soon after that another blast followed, this time in a telephone booth in town.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

<sup>37</sup> New Age, 11/1/1962; 1/2/1962; 22/2/1962.

The blasts were followed by police raids and harassment in the homes and families of political leaders such as Mhlaba, Mbeki, Ma-Baard, Mayekiso, Florence Matomela, Mazizi Ncoko and others. The sabotage campaign intensified in the Eastern Cape despite police harassment.

Some of the incidents mentioned below occurred in Port Elizabeth and East London. An attempt was made to set alight two wool stores in Port Elizabeth; damage was done in a chemical factory; telephone wires were cut in some trunk lines; the house of Memory Maneli, Kaiser Matanzima's representative was completely burnt down; offices at a quarry in Port Elizabeth were broken into and dynamite was stolen; an incendiary bomb was thrown into the house of detective Gazo; and in East London a petrol bomb exploded in the location Administration Office.

The upsurge of sabotage was followed by an intensive police terror campaign and many people in Port Elizabeth were arrested and assaulted. Still more sabotage was reported there. Twenty nine wires forming one of the major telephone and telex outlets from Port Elizabeth were cut and as a result communication was disrupted. The saboteurs put an iron clamp on the railway tracks in an attempt to derail a train in Perseverance near Port Elizabeth.<sup>38</sup> The form and pattern of sabotage activities pointed to the existence of sabotage units, although these units were formed on an ad hoc bases.

The ad hoc sabotage units in the country were eventually co-ordinated into what later became Umkhonto Wesizwe. When Mhlaba came back from China in December 1962, he returned as an MK cadre. He explains this as the forging of military alliance between the SACP and the ANC because his leaving for China was carried out under the auspices of the Communist Party. He heard about the official launching of the MK from China.

Within a month after his return, Mhlaba was assigned to leave the country, this time to escort Joe Modise on another mission. Modise was on the run from the police and so left in January 1963. Mhlaba had to be back in the country by 1 July and following orders, he had to cross the border on the night of the 1st from Dar es Salaam. Within a week of his return, while organising recruits for military training in Johannesburg, the

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<sup>38</sup>

New Age, 4/10/1962; 11/10/1962; 25/10/1962; 8/11/1962 & 15/11/1962.

South African police raided the Rivonia farm. Mhlaba was found in the farm and was arrested with Govan Mbeki and others.<sup>39</sup>

Like Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Mlangeni, Kathrada, Bernstein, Goldberg, Mhlaba was charged for acts of sabotage. Mhlaba was also accused in the Rivonia Trial and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Eventually he spent twenty six years in Robben Island and was released in 1989. And this is another episode of his political career which goes beyond the bounds of the this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

It has become clear that the banning orders imposed by Swart, on Mhlaba and other leaders in Port Elizabeth, did not succeed to stop them from fighting against apartheid and exploitation. More repression instead was met with intense efforts to mobilise more people against the government in semi and sometimes complete clandestinity.

With the implementation of the M-Plan, the Port Elizabeth ANC operated more efficiently. Mass organisation continued and was sustained throughout the 1950s. This is attributed also to the regrouping and infiltration of the SACP members in the M-Plan structures.

Even though Mhlaba was less directly involved, what he had done contributed to the sustained use of strategies such as stayaways and consumer boycotts in the late 1950s. The ban of the ANC and the PAC and the declaration of the State of Emergency in 1960 did not at all deter people such as Mhlaba from fighting for justice. Under the auspices of the SACP he left the country for military training, rather than succumbing to the Nationalist government's tyranny.

The transition from open, mass organisation to underground operation, first by the SACP and then the ANC, was, however not a smooth one. For Mhlaba and others it culminated in their arrest at Rivonia in 1963.

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<sup>39</sup>

Interview, Raymond Mhlaba, 24/12/1990.

## CONCLUSION

### **The 'Voice of the Past'?**

The thesis has shown that organised, militant and popular resistance in Port Elizabeth heightened between 1941 and 1963. With the emergence of a distinctively working class leadership, a close working relationship between labour and political movements solidified. If the Eastern Cape was the cradle of African nationalism, Port Elizabeth in particular has been distinctive in the sense that there, nationalist politics have been integrated with working class politics. In Port Elizabeth, a communist/trade unionist oriented leadership waged co-ordinated and concerted struggle against racial oppression and economic exploitation. This struggle was based on a non-racial and working class footing.

However, it would be misleading to think that all Africans in Port Elizabeth supported the dominant non-racial-working class leadership. The transformation of the ANC in the mid-1940s was not welcomed by some of the African middle class in New Brighton. They regarded the Port Elizabeth communists as illiterates and irresponsible people who were misleading the people. The ANC was regarded as an organisation of illiterates which had only resulted in people being sent to jail during the Defiance Campaign.

Not everybody was happy with the outcome of the Freedom Charter. Those who were African nationalists within the PE ANC branch saw it as a communist ploy. One informant states that they (African nationalists) 'realised that there was something wrong, because over the years the ANC was making adjustments which it did not have in its constitution, until it became evident that even a white man could be an ANC president'. Even though there was a discernible communist influence, to them the ANC was always an African organisation. After the adoption of the Freedom Charter, the differences between the Africanists and communists became more pronounced.<sup>1</sup> The Africanist faction subsequently left the ANC and joined the PAC.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Mthobi Nazo, 15/5/1992.

Despite these schisms, the distinctively working class and non-racial ANC constituency remained dominant. Port Elizabeth still exhibits a continuity of historical and political traditions. There is still a very strong political and trade union activity visible in the now formalised Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, SACP, and COSATU. The continuity of popular and working class forms of organisation and mobilisation can be attributed to the foundations laid by Mhlaba together with many of his colleagues.

The intention of this study has been to depict the broader historical currents and forms of social and political organisation. An attempt has been made to examine these issues through the prism of Mhlaba's biography.

Both the analytical and narrative approach have been used to explore the lived experience of Mhlaba and other key activists. We believe that his biography has provided an understanding of both social action and human agency. Mhlaba's activism and personal life have been shown to have social and political behaviour, and to have provided energy for human action. As a consequence, observes Laslett, "it becomes possible to connect the personal with the social, to recognise the personal in the social".<sup>2</sup>

Mhlaba's biography can be seen as a type of case study, because it provides private dimensions of events in ways less available in other research strategies. It shows links between the individual and social organisation, and reveals that the social structure and social organisation cannot be adequately understood without taking account of central personal issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Laslett, "Biography as historical sociology" in *Theory and Society*, vol.20, no.4, August 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 524-529.

## Epilogue

Looking back at the past sixty years, we continue to see the loyal '**Man of the Masses**' who represents organisations fighting against national oppression and economic exploitation. Having been born in Fort Beaufort, among the poorest of the rural African populations, Mhlaba had to live school from early youth and work in an urban town. Endowed with a curious mind, the young man was initiated into the interests of the workers in Port Elizabeth. He learnt about the needs of the working class and their striving for freedom. He had shown the capacity for getting to grips with problems confronting working class people. Mhlaba had also shown the ability to appraise the problems and grasp the viewpoints of the people. This stems from his empathy and close contact with the working people before 1963.

After spending twenty six years in prison, Mhlaba was released and continued where he left off, albeit in changed and changing circumstances. He is part of the national leadership of both the ANC and the SACP, and also plays a leading role in the formal alliance. It is worth noting that Mhlaba's life personifies the continuity of political traditions and ideological discourse. He is still at the 'cutting edge' of the historical and political developments in the Eastern Cape and nationally. He is not just a voice from the past, but also a pioneer to the future.



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